FRINGE PLATFORMS

Tim de Winkel

Fringe platforms

An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere

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Fringe platformen

Een analyse van radicale platformalternatieven voor mainstream sociale media in de online publieke sfeer
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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Preface

Co-authored publications and collaborations

The research presented in this monograph is individual work. However, chapters of this dissertation were used for other academic contributions such as conferences, journal articles, and book chapters, written in cooperation with my supervisors and other academics. I discuss my contributions to these texts in this preface. In general, the collectives of Governing the Digital Society (GDS) and the Utrecht Data School (UDS), have shaped this research in ways too numerous to sum up. As a member, I organised and participated in colloquia, research projects, conferences, summer schools, and much more, all of which has been informative, instrumental, and inspirational to this dissertation.

Dijck, José van, Tim de Winkel, and Mirko Tobias Schäfer. 2021. "Deplatformization and the Governance of the Platform Ecosystem." *New Media & Society* 0, no. 0: 1-17, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211045662.

Dijck, José van, Tim de Winkel, and Mirko Tobias Schäfer. Forthcoming. "Deplatforming and Deplatformization as Governance Strategies." In *Handbook for Media and Communication Governance*, edited by Manuel Puppis, Hilde van den Bulck, and Robin Mansell. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Parts of Chapter 4, and to a lesser extent Chapter 5, have been published as the journal article titled "Deplatformization and the governance of the platform ecosystem" (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021) in *New Media & Society,* as well as the forthcoming book chapter titled "Deplatforming and deplatformization as governance strategies"(van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer forthcoming) that has been accepted by, and will be published in, the *Handbook for Media and Communication Governance* in 2024. Both of these texts are partially based on the drafts of my chapters. My contributions to those texts can be summarized as follows: I was responsible for the analyses and theorization of the Gab case, and contributed substantially to the overall theoretical framework, specifically to the sections on deplatforming and deplatformization, and to the section on a far-right parallel platform ecosystem. My coauthors were responsible for the other two examples of deplatformization in these papers, namely that of the platforms Parler and BitChute, as well as the remainder of theoretical the work.

De Winkel, Tim, Ludo Gorzeman, Sofie de Wilde de Ligny, Thomas ten Heuvel, Melissa Blekkenhorst, Sander Prins, and Mirko Tobias Schäfer. "The Gab Project. The Methodological, Epistemological, and Legal Challenges of Studying the Platformized Far-Right" *The Journal of Right-Wing Studie*s (under review).

A small portion of the quantitative analyses in Chapter 3, Section 2.3 'Publics and Content', are based on the results of the collaborative research project "Data-mining Hate-Speech. Analysing speech, images and interactions on Gab.ai, the 'Twitter of the alt right'", henceforth referred to as 'the Gab project'. Although the Gab project was meant to contribute to this dissertation, it is a separate interdisciplinary and collaborative research project of the Utrecht Data School. [1] The forthcoming method paper titled "The Gab Project: The Methodological, Epistemological and Legal Challenges of Studying the Platformized Far-Right" details the analyses, data capture, data storage, ethics and legal challenges of the Gab project. The paper is currently (01-08-2023) under peer review toward inclusion in the Journal of Right-Wing Studies' special issue on "The Curse of Relevance", and will therefore not be referenced in this dissertation. Several subprojects of the Gab project have produced academic output, such as a number of master theses,[2] several conference presentations,[3] and input for a journalistic article.[4] I will, at times, refer to this output. I was involved in nearly all subprojects of the Gab project, either as coordinator, supervisor, researcher, presenter, and/or co-author. The methodology of the data-mining and data-analyses will be further explained in Chapter 1, Section 2.3 'Methodology'. Apart from the data-analyses, no further source material has been shared between the *Gab project* and this dissertation.

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1 https://dataschool.nl/.

2 Blekkenhorst, Melissa. 2019. "Moderating Online Extremism on Fringe and Mainstream Platforms; An analysis of governance by Gab & Twitter." Master's thesis, Utrecht University. https://studenttheses.uu.nl/.

Wilde de Ligny, Sofie de. 2022. "An Analysis of How Fringe Platform Gab. Com Relates to the Process of Platformization." Master's thesis, Utrecht University. https://studenttheses.uu.nl/.

3 Blekkenhorst, Melissa., Ludo Gorzeman, Mauricio Salazar, and Tim de Winkel. 2019 "Studying the fringe of the platform society: gab.ai." *Presentation, 3rd international Data Power conference*, University of Bremen, 12 September 2019.

Salazar, Mauricio., and Tim de Winkel. 2019. "'Performing Diversity On Toxic Soil? Researching Topical Groups On The Radical Free Speech Platform Gab." *Poster Presentation presented at the AoIR Flashpoint Symposium. Below the Radar: Private Groups, Locked Platforms and Ephemeral Contents*, University of Urbino, June 24.

Winkel, Tim de., Mauricio Salazar, Ludo Gorzeman, and Melissa Blekkenhorst. 2019. "Hosting radical-fuelled periphery networks: Investigating the fringe platform Gab.ai." *Project presented at the 15th International Conference of Sociocybernetics "Dark Ages 2.0": Social Media And Their Impact*, University of Urbino, Italy.

Gorzeman, Ludo. 2019. "#SpeakingTruth: understanding false epistemologies on an alt-right fringe platform." *Project presented at the International Conference "Technology and Society"*, KU Leuven, Belgium. Presentation accessible through https://nomennesc.io/presentatie-leuven/.

4 Boeschoten, Thomas., and Coen van den Ven. 'Je Gaat Me Toch Niet Als Genuanceerd Wegzetten Hè?' *Groene Amsterdammer* 35. 28 August 2019 https://www.groene.nl/artikel/je-gaat-me-toch-niet-als-genuanceerd-wegzetten-he.

The research justification for the article can be found here https://www.groene.nl/artikel/verantwoording-bij-alt-light-en-alt-right-domineren-nederlands-twitter.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, José van Dijck, Mirko Schäfer, and Karin van Es. All committee members, dr. A. Helmond, Prof. dr. E Müller, Prof. dr. A. Rigney, Prof. dr. L.E.M. Taylor, and Prof. dr. W.C. Uricchio. My family, extended family, overextended family, in-laws, nephews, nephews or nieces to be, as well as all my dear friends - old, new, those I know from my studies, my work, bouldering, as roommates, or otherwise, I appreciate you all. I want to thank Els Stronks, Christien Franken, Frank Kessler and Dorieke Molenaar. I want to thank all my friends and colleagues with whom I have shared offices, Stephanie, Desi, Rosa, Irene, Gerwin, Dennis, Daniela, and Duan. Sander and Maranke. You have been important. My colleagues at the department, Imar, Michiel and the rest. My friends at GDS, Fernando, Victoria, Inte, and all others. Iris, Thomas, Max and everyone I worked with all those years at the Utrecht Data School. Noortje, who pointed me to an UDS vacancy. Ard, Lucas, Ernst, Fur, and Patrick. Christl, Yentl, Tamara, Robin, and Djarno. All my comrades from 0.7, the CasualAcademy, and all other activists I have met in my final three years. A tip of my hat to WOinactie. My gratitude to Joep, Ruud, Paul, Mies, Ies, and Sue of the LO, and also everyone from the AOB and the other unions, Annemieke, Jan, Sander, Ahmed, and Donald, thank you for being so welcoming. Ilse Lazaroms, let's stay in touch. And although we have never been in touch, my gratitude to Susanne Täuber, Fleur Jongepier, and Sara Ahmed, because their courage is so inspiring. Extinction Rebellion, all antifascists, Het Woonprotest, Lisa Westerveld, Nico Sannes, Fran Drescher, Christian Smalls, Magnus Hirschfeld, Natalie Wynn, Fique (you probably resent being in here, but I cannot help the fact that you are so inspiring to white boys in academia), Haile Gebrselassie a salute from my childhood, Will Bevan, and Kirsty MacColl. To all, fully and truthfully, my acknowledgements.

So. What have I acknowledged? What did just happen? Professor Ken Hyland[5] states that academic genres are never purely informational, but are used by its writers to promote a competent, discipline-situated, and scholarly identity. Acknowledgements specifically, he adds, convey way more than gratitude, they signal "valued academic ideals of modesty, gratitude and appropriate self-effacement". Although I am not sure if I situated myself within a discipline, I most certainly signaled whom I aligned myself with. This does not mean I was untruthful, because I was not. I am thankful to all that were mentioned, and I will try to tell you all again in person. However, during the composition of this acknowledgement piece, I struggled. As a first year Research master student in Dutch language and literature, I once read a text about 'gift giving'. And although I cannot remember the author, or the text for

5 Hyland, Ken. 2004. "Graduates' gratitude: The generic structure of dissertation acknowledgements." *English for Specific purposes* 23, no. 3: 303-324.

that matter - I think it was part of a Saskia Pietersen syllabus -, what always stuck with me is that in the act of giving, something is returned as well, taken perhaps.

Since my PhD I have been committed to keeping academia away from my romantic relationship, because I experience the academic hierarchies and customs as deeply sexist and therefore dangerous to what I love and wish to protect. But I cannot maintain this distance when it is time to thank my partner, as I am required to do, according to the contemporary genre conventions of a dissertation acknowledgements section. I have wondered a lot what I will take, when 'giving' her the acknowledgements within the frame of this page. Similar to a Petrarcan poem, I feel I would describe the other, to say something primarily about myself. Putting her on a proverbial pedestal, on the day that I will probably be placed on an actual pedestal, quite a few times. So maybe, instead of describing her as my mainstay, my grindstone, or any other innate object that paints her in a facilitating role, I will put Hyland's analysis in practice, and use this section to cloak myself with ideals. But instead of those that are widely valued within academia, I would like to acknowledge the ideals that are horrifyingly undervalued in academia. I wish to acknowledge all committed fathers, caregivers, teachers, public servants, and community participants. When we make room for others on a daily basis, they will not need our acknowledgement within academic genres anymore.

For now, I will leave the fluorescent flat caffeine lights.
It is a furious balancing
the screen, the blinding light
But I see today with a newsprint fray
My night is colored,
headache gray.[6]

6 Michael Stipe's.

1 Introduction
Studying the platform ecosystem by looking at its margins

1. From publics and dissemination to infrastructures and platformization

At the beginning of my PhD research, I intended to study how discourses and publics moved from the fringes to the center of the public sphere, but only a few months into this trajectory my research object disappeared. *Gab*, the radical social media platform I intended to study, was forced offline because it was implicated in a far-right terrorist attack with a deadly ending. A few months of work gone might sound salvageable, but I had also spent a year writing and rewriting a research proposal, performed the preliminary platform analysis which would result in my first case study, and even started the 'Gab project'[7] which entailed data analyses on a data scrape of the entire platform. I was concerned that a lot of work had suddenly disappeared.

Fortunately, I could resume my research when Gab resurfaced a week later, but both the platform and my dissertation had already fundamentally changed by then. For Gab, securing its presence online became a top priority, and as a consequence the platform would eventually move its entire infrastructure to a Mastodon server.[8] Accordingly, my research changed its focus from an investigation of how Gab disseminates its radicalism to mainstream platforms, and whether this dissemination subverted the principles of the public sphere, to an investigation of the dynamic between radical and mainstream platforms, and to the question how radical platform technology can inform us about processes of governance and platformization in the online public sphere.

In hindsight, the deplatformization[9] of Gab (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021) was the best thing that could have happened to the project: the most interesting elements of

7 The Gab project refers to a collaborative project that studied the fringe platform through data scrapes and computational analyses. See the preface to this dissertation or the section '2.3 Methodology' of this chapter for elaboration.

8 I will come back to this in Chapter 4.

9 The deplatformization of Gab refers to the platform losing its partnerships and web infrastructures, which forced it temporarily offline. All terminology, such as 'deplatformization', 'platformized public sphere' and 'fringe platforms' will be explained in this chapter.

my research object came into focus, which changed the scope and lens of the research, and enhanced its relevance. Of course, I did not realize this at the time. It happened gradually, when I made the disappearance of Gab central to my second case study and asked why Gab disappeared and who pushed it offline. Interestingly, my analysis of Gab as a technology that challenges mainstream social media platforms turned out to be revealing of the influence of Big Tech in our public sphere. More importantly, I came to understand that I had been using a partial analytical frame. Instead of only investigating the online public sphere as a collection of services and publics, I needed to include its underpinnings, its infrastructures, since that is where power resides.

Thus, this dissertation has a dual aim: firstly, it discusses the dynamic between radical platform technology and Big Tech, and secondly, it unravels the significance of this dynamic for understanding our contemporary online public sphere, which is under the conditions of platformization. This includes both the investigation of Gab as a platform technology and an ecosystem for discourse, as well as the study of the platformized web as a contested site and as an ecosystem with infrastructures, ideological pillars, technological boundaries, layers, vital points, and owners. In this chapter, I elaborate on the motive behind this research (Section 1.1), introduce the new concepts of this dissertation (Section 1.2), and explain my choice of Gab as a research object (Section 1.3). Then, in Section 2, I first embed my research in my theoretical presuppositions on media, technology and platforms, as well as in the academic fields of platform studies and infrastructure studies. I subsequently explain the analytical lenses of this dissertation and my methodological framework. Finally, in Section 3, I elaborate on the aims, contributions, and challenges of this research.

1.1 Radical platforms of far-right terrorism?

On 27 October 2018, a white supremacist killed eleven people during a terrorist attack on the Pittsburgh Tree of Life synagogue. For nearly a year, the perpetrator had displayed his anti-Semitism and love of guns on Gab.ai, now known as Gab.com – a social network that is popular amongst conservatives and the far-right[10] which claims to champion free speech, individual liberty, and the free flow of information. On the morning of his attack, he posted a final message, "HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in."[11] (Turkewitz and Roose 2018).

10 Following scholars of the far-right Cas Mudde (2019) and Andrea Pirro (2022), I will use the term 'far-right' as an umbrella term to describe the right that is 'anti-system' or hostile to liberal democracy. The concept of the 'far-right' contains two distinct sub-categories: the 'radical right' which are illiberal-democratic and want to overthrow liberal democracy through parliamentary and legal ways, and the 'extreme right' which are anti-democratic and thus open to taking power outside of democratic means, including through the use of violence and insurrection.

11 HIAS is the abbreviation of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which is a Jewish American non-profit organization that provides humanitarian aid and assistance to refugees. White supremacists and anti-

On 15 March 2019, a white supremacist terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, cost fifty-one people their lives. The perpetrator live-streamed the mass shootings through Facebook, and used the website 8chan to mobilize and direct his audience. Online imageboard[12] 8chan[13], now called '8kun', is a radical variant of the already quite radical 4chan. Through 8chan posts (see Figure 1), the terrorist announced his attack by posting pictures of the murder weapons two days in advance (Evans 2019a). He also shared a hyperlink to his stream of the killings and spread a white supremacist manifesto, all of which made the attack go 'viral' (Macklin 2019). Both the act itself and the accompanying manifesto were gamified[14] and memetic,[15] and were consequently dubbed the first "Internet-native mass shooting, conceived and produced entirely within the irony-soaked discourse of modern extremism" (Roose 2019).

These terrorist attacks and many other recent acts of terror[16] share the same tropes and conspiracies: they are explicitly far-right, anti-immigration, antisemitic, anti-feminist, anti-left wing, white supremacist, conspiratorial, and accelerationist. These tropes are often

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semite adherents of 'the great replacement theory' (a conspiracy theory) hold that Jewish organisations such as HIAS purposely dilute the white race by bringing non-white immigrants to 'white' countries.

12 An imageboard is an internet forum that facilitates, and whose social dynamics depend heavily on, the posting of images.

13 Sometimes pronounced as 'Infinitechan'.

14 Gamification means that some tasks, or some elements of that task, are made into a game, by adopting a game design or a game logic, in order to create motivation and enhance performance. Both the performance and reception of alt-right terror attacks are increasingly gamified (Evans 2019b). An example of this is that the number of victims the terrorist made is sometimes referred to - by the alt-right communities, including by the terrorists themselves - as a 'high score'.

15 'Memetic' or memeable refers to the potential to become a meme. A 'meme' refers to a travelling cultural unit (Dawkins 2016). In the context of the online, which is – I would argue - its most potent context, meme often refers to an image, piece of text, videoclip, or audio bit that is open to appropriation, co-optation, and reassembling. As a perfect example of Lessig's "remix culture", it can travel the web as "floating signifiers" in Levi-Strauss and later Laclau's use of the term (Tuters and Hagen 2020). Political memes have shown to be able to connect publics and actors to political behaviour and antagonism. An example of the memetic aspect of the terrorist attack was the notoriously racist song that was played in the background of the livestream of the attack, which still travels the mainstream web as a reference to the event (Macklin 2019).

16 Far-right terrorism is the biggest terrorist threat in the Western world (Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington 2020). During the last decade, the United States have endured many acts of domestic white supremacist terrorism, for instance in July 2019 three deadly attacks commenced within a week (Harwell 2019). Compiling an exhaustive list of these far-right terrorist attacks in which the online and its specific cultures proved to be vital would hardly provide a more insightful overview, so I will limit myself to a set number of examples throughout this chapter. Generally, the targets of far-right terrorism are primarily ethnic minorities and immigrants, women, and left-wing or even centrist politicians such as Walter Lübcke and Henriette Reker.

grounded in some version of the 'great replacement theory'[17], and often involve obscure and radical social media platforms.[18] The pattern is that of (young) men expressing their far-right views to like-minded people online, eventually announcing a terrorist attack in these fringe social media spaces, and subsequently sharing footage, manifestos, or other forms of documentation of their atrocities. These online far-right communities then celebrate the perpetrators, and further disseminate the documentation of attack and attacker, whose notoriety inspires the next attack.

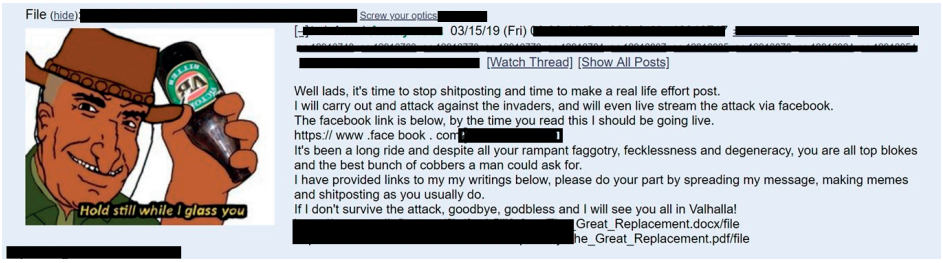

Figure 1: The 8chan post that announces the Christchurch attack; it includes a link to the manifesto and a reference (encircled) to the synagogue killing of five months earlier. Source and date are the 8chan's /pol/ board on which it was posted 15 March 2019. The image is a meme and thus has no fixed author. I will not disclose any further information on this post, or link to its archived location, since I do not want to disseminate it any further. Section 1.1 and 3.2 of this chapter will further explain this choice.

The Christchurch attack serves as a prime example of online "modern extremism" (Roose 2019) where the ludic and disseminating qualities of these contemporary far-right terrorist attacks are at the forefront. The manifesto was riddled with sarcasm, obvious red herrings, and allusions to meme culture, suggesting an internet-driven radicalization of nationalist and racist hatred (Marsh and Mulholland 2019). However newsworthy and relevant the document might have been, it was also a trap laid specifically for journalists who were not only searching for meaning behind the attack (Evans 2019a), but also for scoops. The manifesto aspired to generate attention, dog whistle to an ingroup, and misdirect a general audience including journalists, referred to as "normies" (Nagle 2017), into a misguided

17 See Footnote 11.

18 The terror attack in El Paso was confirmed to have 8chan activity, leaving the image-board under heavy scrutiny (Evans 2019b). There have also been a series of Incel (involuntary celibate) terror attacks - combining misogynistic motives with white supremacy - where social media played a role in both radicalizing the culprit and disseminating his attack as a media-event. The most notable cases are the 2018 Toronto Van attack, which killed 10 people, where Facebook, Reddit and 4chan were used for dissemination (Beauchamp 2018; Boyd 2018), and the Isla Vista killings in 2014, where the killer used Reddit and YouTube to spread Vlogs and a manifesto (Kang 2014). The Charleston church shooter and the killer of British MP Jo Cox were both avid Daily Stormer readers (Hayden 2017).

response that kept the attention going.[19] Put simply, these types of attacks are designed as media-events, understood by their own, yet experienced as cacophonic by the general public, that inspire and set-off the next bursts of violence. The dissemination of manifestos is an instrumental link in this chain.[20]

The far-right has gone online, where it developed rather specific dynamics and spaces, with rather spectacular and horrific offline consequences. It is thus no surprise that, over the past years, the Western world has become preoccupied with the corner of the internet that is oozing with radical speech and meme-culture, and that is now perceived as a breeding space for violence. Journalists and academics, intelligence agencies and homeland security agencies have taken notice of the sprawl of these 'new' radical alternative social media (Department of Homeland Security 2019; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid 2018). These spaces are not closed groups or private forums, but open platforms that seem unapologetic about the racism, sexism, conspiracy theories, and endorsements of violence[21] they host. Leniency toward radical rhetoric is part of the founding principles of these alternative social media. In this dissertation, I intend to look further into these online spaces where domestic right-wing terrorism is streamed, planned, bred, and/or celebrated. Are they white supremacist forums, a Nazi-Twitter, or (just) far-right echo chambers? Or, are they something else altogether?

1.2 The platformized public sphere

The far-right terrorist attacks remind us how toxic and devastating certain discourses can be. Social media, where these discourses are circulated and allowed, are therefore predominantly researched as conductors of hate speech and radicalism. However, to understand platforms such as 8chan and Gab primarily as breeding grounds for white supremacist ter-

19 The manifesto – or at least the interpretative layer that is obviously ironic and deceptive – seems to follow the logic of 'trolling' and 'shitposting' (Evans 2019a), which lures a general public into thinking that what was said ironically is intended seriously, effectively emphasizing an ingroup/outgroup dynamic. Trolls aim to provoke an emotional reaction in others, while retaining an ironic stance themselves. Even derailing productive discussion can be a goal in itself, for example by flooding a discussion or topic with ironic distraction, also referred to as 'shitposting'.

20 Anders Breivik's attack in July 2011 was preceded by a manifesto warning people about the ethnic replacement of Europeans by Muslim migrants. Subsequent terrorists have praised Breivik's attacks, listed him as inspiration, and subscribed to his ethno-nationalist and anti-immigration positions, including the Christchurch shooter, who also left a manifesto. Six months after the Tree of Life killings, another attack commenced on a synagogue in Poway, California. The terrorist published yet another manifesto on 8chan, citing the Christchurch and Pittsburgh attacks as his inspirations, and echoing similar antisemitic and anti-immigrant conspiracy theories. The primary inspiration for the perpetrator of the Toronto van attack were the Isla Vista killings in 2014 and the manifesto he left behind (Kang 2014).

21 Visit these places and it's not hard to find 'anons' celebrating the mass murders committed by one of their own (Evans 2019a).

rorism might be reductive of what they actually are, and more importantly, what they could tell us about our online media systems. A sole focus on the visible phenomenon of radical speech (the content), rather than on the transformations of the infrastructures where it takes place (a media technology), fails to capture it as part of a larger system of communication and information services. These radical alternative social media are not separate spaces but part of the overall online sphere, even if they are in contestation with the mainstream spaces of this sphere. Understood through this perspective, these platforms evoke all kinds of important questions about issues such as moderation, online democratic participation through the medium of speech, the role of social media platforms as gatekeepers, the role of Big Tech as the governing institution online, the consequences of the platformization of public infrastructures, and the importance of functioning communication and information services for rational-critical democratic discourse.

The upsurge of what I propose to call 'fringe platforms' raises questions on whether this contemporary online sphere can function as – what has been theorized as – the public sphere. For the rise of social media have transformed our means of communication and the provision of information so drastically that it is no longer clear who has the control over, ownership of, or responsibility for the spaces of public deliberation and information that are vital for a functioning democracy. In Chapter 2, I propose two theoretical concepts: 'fringe platforms' and the 'platformized public sphere', to help us understand and describe the transformation of the online public sphere and the radical new platforms that brought questions of online governance to the forefront. The new concept of the platformized public sphere is a contraction of the two primary theoretical frameworks of this dissertation. It combines public sphere theory – which focuses on the public sphere as the central arena for societal communication where different opinions are expressed, problems of general concern are deliberated, and solutions to these problems are developed collectively –, with platformization theory – which focuses on digital platforms infiltrating infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms (Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck 2019, 1). Brought into dialogue through the concept of the 'platformized public sphere', these theoretical frameworks explain our contemporary public sphere that has increasingly undergone the process of platformization.

The concept of fringe platforms frames the new radical platform services as anti-hegemonic or counter technologies that contest major mainstream social media platforms.

Mainstream social media [22] (henceforth referred to as MsSM[23]) refer to the platforms that are "either linked to, or outright owned by" (Chomsky 1997) Big Tech corporations, and are therefore part of the Big Tech social media ecosystem. Fringe platforms object to the accumulated power of Big Tech, and their guardianship over the public debate. Such a frame of *contestation*[24] allows for the analysis of Gab in relation to a dominant mainstream, and as symptomatic of the ongoing platformization of the public sphere. This perspective might be less obvious when the aforementioned spaces are entangled in white supremacist terrorist attacks, but it is no less urgent. Radical free speech fringe platforms signify as much a contestation against Big Tech's governance of the public debate as they signify the far-right manifesting online.

The emergence of fringe platforms calls for a renewed understanding of the online spaces of public life. They are part of the larger system of the public sphere, of which platform media are now a substantial part, and where a fringe-mainstream or center-periphery dynamic operates. Fringe platforms are not just sanctuaries for the de-platformed, echo chambers for the alt-right, and a safe space from where radical discourses can be disseminated to the mainstream, but also a materialized rhetoric of contention to Big Tech's power over the online. It is by looking at platforms such as Gab.com, its conflict with the major platforms, and its influence on the dynamics of the online information and communication system, that the conditions of the public sphere become visible. Thus, the present study will focus on where the new parameters of speech are contested, in order to understand the renegotiation of the norms – and ultimately the conditions – of the platformized public sphere.

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22 The term 'mainstream media' evokes a binary or spectrum (Kenix 2011) where it serves as the opposite of alternative media – or fringe –, but largely refuses a definition beyond such a relation. Journalism studies and media scholars acknowledge that the term implies that they are corporate media organizations with a vertical organizational structure, that they are part of a much broader media ecology, and that they are closely linked to the establishment or elite, and therefore probably far from radical (Hájek and Carpentier 2015, 365-366). Any further definition is context specific, and this context is largely a reflection of power structures. For me a definition of mainstream is not attainable, but also less important than the concept of its counterpart, which I will define at length through this dissertation. Through the definition of the fringe, the mainstream will show itself. Finally, the Chomsky quote in the middle part of the sentence refers to traditional media.

23 Since the abbreviation MsM is used for Mainstream Media, this research truncates Mainstream *Social* Media as MsSM.

24 I have chosen the term *contestation* because it emphasizes a (discursive) plane and conflict (of interest), and is therefore compatible with my theorization of the public sphere, hegemony, and counterpublics in Chapter 2. Admittingly, it is also a reference to the concept of "zones of contestation" by postcolonial scholars Breckenridge and Appadurai (1995), whose theory was applied to the networked media of the web, by Robert Glenn Howard in his contribution 'The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media' (Howard 2008). Howard claims that networked media have the potential to be countercultural and anti-institutional, while "the technologies that create these locations are typically produced, maintained, and funded by institutions" (2008, 492). In this hybridity, they give rise to 'zones of contestation'.

In this dissertation I concern myself with the platformization of our public sphere. The transformation of our spaces of deliberation and information into a platformized organization has rearranged the relationship between media, citizens, state, and capital within this sphere. The advancing platformization of these spaces of democratic deliberation have undermined the role of the old gatekeeping institutions. MsSM platforms are increasingly taking up the responsibility of governing the public sphere – through Terms of Service (ToS), moderation, and otherwise –, partly to abide by legal and governmental requirements, and partly to protect their business models. This changing of the guards re-sets the parameters of how public speech is governed online, and fringe platforms object to this governance. The dynamic of contestation between mainstream and fringe platforms, elicits moments of public and democratic tension, where the platformization of the public sphere becomes visible. In that manner, fringe platforms function as an entry point through which the platformized public sphere can be analyzed. This dissertation explores the (shifting) hierarchies in our platformized public sphere, by focusing on the radical platform technologies that contest the hegemony and governance of Big Tech companies over the web. Accordingly, the main research questions are: *What is the role of fringe social media platforms in a platformized public sphere? What hierarchies and shifts in power do they signify? And how can they inform us about the platform ecosystem?*

1.3 The case for Gab

In order to understand the role of fringe platforms in the (platformized) public sphere, I analyze the fringe platform *Gab*. Gab.com is an alternative social media service, launched in August 2016, that advocates for free speech and a free flow of information online. It functions as a microblogging platform that provides 'Interactive Services'.[25] Although it presents itself predominantly as an alternative to Twitter, it also adopts features from several social media, most visibly Reddit. Research on Gab shows high levels of political activity and of toxicity (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018; Lima et al. 2018). With an estimate of between 100,000 and 4 million users[26] – depending on whether one counts the number of profiles or only the number of active accounts (Lee 2021) – Gab is one of the largest and most infamous of radical and hateful social media.[27] Ever since the platform was implicated in the Pittsburgh attack, it has been under heavy public and governing scrutiny.

25 https://gab.com/about/tos.

26 There are several reasons for the large discrepancy between these numbers. There is indeed the difference between active users and profiles, and Gab itself is rather opaque and dishonest in its communication about user numbers. Additionally, as alluded to in the first paragraph, Gab went through major (infra) structural changes which are expected to have a major influence on the number of users and accounts.

27 This is not to say that there are not bigger or more notorious far-right websites, channels, outlets, or fora than Gab, but in the category of these alternative radical free speech social media, Gab has been one of the most prominent for half a decade now.

Platforms such as Gab often cause media panic but, as I already mentioned, for academics they are an interesting case to study the renegotiation of governance and power in the online public sphere. This renegotiation has been unfolding in plain sight ever since MsSM platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, but also Reddit, WhatsApp, and Tumblr, among many others, intensified the moderation of their 'mainstream' spaces. Gab especially has been at the center of public concern about radical platform technologies and as such, has received considerable academic attention. Alongside 8kun and Parler, it has reinvigorated the debate on moderation of the online public sphere. My choice of Gab as a case study is based on this notoriety, as well as on its size, and the applicability of Gab with the fringe framework of contention. Additionally, as I already mentioned in the opening paragraph of this chapter, during the course of this research, Gab lost its infrastructural services – a process called *deplatformization*[28] (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021), and subsequently had to replatform.[29] This development steered my research in the direction of a theoretical framework of platform and infrastructure studies.

In this dissertation Gab functions as a case study in three different ways. As Chapter 2 delineates, fringe platforms capture a wide array of platform services, public domains, and ideological proclivities. The choice for Gab means that this research focuses on the fringe social media services that contest the governance of expression as espoused by MsSM.[30] More specifically, it deals with fringe platforms that abide by the ethos of radical free speech, and thus advocate for less moderation on – for example – conspiracy, hate speech, and fake news, as opposed to fringe platforms that advocate for more free speech and less hate speech.[31] This means that the communities and technologies I study, have a far-right and/or alt-right[32] signature. Nonetheless, my focus is not on right-wing extremism and alt-right tropes themselves. Rather, I emphasize what these fringe social media platforms can tell us about the larger domain of the public sphere in which power and publicness are renegotiated. Hence, Gab serves as a *pars pro toto* for understanding the role of these platforms in the public sphere, and thereby the public sphere itself. Consequently, it cannot be studied as a closed-off space that is separate from mainstream spaces. The fringe and the mainstream

28 I define and elaborate on the concept of deplatformization in Chapter 3. Here, the term refers to a platform getting 'deplatformed' because the infrastructural services they depend on, such as payment systems and hosting, terminate their contracts with sec platform.

29 I will come back to this term and phenomenon in Chapter 5, but for now 'replatforming' can be understood as adopting alternative infrastructural services.

30 Chapters 4 and Chapter 5 also touch upon fringe communities and technology that predominantly contest ownership models and governing structures.

31 I will come back to the different categories of fringe platforms in Chapter 2 in the section 'Categorizing fringe platforms'.

32 'Alt-right' is an abbreviation of 'alternative right'. This loose affiliation of different far-right and online groups compiles an extremist, patriarchal, and radical white supremacists movement, spawn from internet troll culture, which is new in style, tactics, and political identity (Hawley 2018).

are counterparts of the same ecosystem or (public) sphere – which is under the condition of platformization –, and my analyses will focus on their interrelations, their shared infrastructures, their center/periphery dynamic and power relations, and their role in the public sphere at large, including its (traditional) institutions, gatekeepers, and publics.

I study radical free speech fringe platforms over other ideological fringes predominantly because of the concept of breakdown. Star and Ruhleder (1996) state that although infrastructure is normally designed to be hidden, it becomes visible upon breakdown. A platform is more than just an invisible technological facility or a hidden facilitating infrastructure, and the process of deplatformization is different from breakdown. Nevertheless, I apply the logics of this concept from infrastructure studies to the field of platform studies, because the process of *becoming visible* through failure or termination, is extremely applicable. Gab was pushed offline when it was denied the infrastructural services it relied on, which were largely in the influence sphere of Big Tech, who – in turn – became visible as governing institution during the deplatformization of Gab.[33] If I want to study the platformized public sphere as a plane where power is renegotiated, I have to look at the spaces where this renegotiation is best visible. Radical free speech platforms generate a lot of controversy because they are linked to far-right terrorism, conspiracies, and hate speech, and therefore mount public pressure on Big Tech services to moderate the online. I choose Gab because its political radicalism forces the 'custodians of the internet' (Gillespie 2018) to govern, in the process becoming visible as powerful governing actors. This is a choice for infrastructural inversion (Bowker and Star 1994); an analysis that goes "against the tendency of infrastructure to disappear" (Bowker and Star 1999, 34).

2. Theoretical grounding, analytical lenses, and methodology

As explained, my dissertation focuses on platformization (Helmond 2015), infrastructures and infrastructuralization (Plantin et al. 2018), governance *of* and *by* platforms (Gillespie 2017), breakdown and contestation, in addition to my concept of fringe platforms and Habermas' concept of the public sphere.[34] In this section I explicate and elaborate on this dissertation's perspective on media and technology, and how this perspective informs my analytical lenses and methodology. I will formulate three postulates from which my analyses depart. These presuppositions are analytical concepts rooted in the academic traditions and academic fields of science and technology studies (STS) and infrastructure studies, combined with system theory, political economy, and datafied media studies perspectives. Having said this, my dissertation is primarily embedded in the academic field of platform

33 Chapter 4 argues this in greater detail.

34 The concepts of Fringe platforms and the Platformized public sphere will be elaborated on in Chapter 2.

studies. Centered in media studies, the – barely a decade old[35]– field known as 'platform studies', explores how computational structures and software environments support what is on top of them (Plantin et al. 2018).

2.1 Theory and academic approaches

This research analyses Gab as a socio-technical machine. By incorporating the infrastructural and material dimensions of the platformized public sphere in my analyses, I move beyond a solely cultural frame, while at the same time avoiding technological determinism. This perspective entails more than just the inclusion of both cultural and technological dimensions in the analysis; it proposes an approach that encompasses the technological, economic and cultural infrastructures of the platform, as well as practices of governance and structures of power. My theoretical presuppositions on platform technologies are captured in the following three main postulates: platforms are 1) socio-technical ecosystems 2) that should be examined as "metaphorical constructs with technological, social, economic, and political dimensions" (Gillespie 2010; van Dijck 2013; van Dijck 2021, 4), in addition to the examination of their social use, governance, design, and discourses (Schäfer 2011, 9–23), and 3) are part of larger assemblages of material and discursive networks or platform ecosystems (van Dijck 2021), which is governed through the same logics, power structures, and economic models.

The first postulate that considers a platform as a socio-technical ecosystem is derived from a perspective that views media and technology as social and immersive. There is broad consensus within the academic study of technical systems that technology is not just a technical artefact. Instead, technology is understood and studied in relation to its human, social, and organizational dimensions. People and technology together form an organization or a 'system'.[36] This socio-technical characterization is especially true for social media where an online environment is shaped by technologies with invisible technical curators (algorithms) and huge amounts of human participation and 'prosumption'. These sociotechnical qualities of media are also captured by the McLuhanesque framework that states that media are not

35 I consider the Bogost and Montfort 2009 book series titled 'platform studies' as the birth of this academic field.

36 The emphasis on the system evokes a theoretical frame of socio-cybernetics, most famously that of Niklas Luhman, which is antithetical to the Bruno Latour framework of the network. The essential difference is that the system is imagined as closed, while the network is open. Just like an ecosystem, a platform technology has boundaries but these are permeable. Both the network and the system are incredible powerful descriptors for social media, and this research will not abide to the academic dichotomy of the two terms. This research understands the platformized public sphere as an ecosystem consisting of smaller platform ecosystems, and points out that the networked structure of the web is enclosed by platform media. This means that both structures are present, but that the platform ecosystem is the dominant structure.

just technological artefacts but also "environments" (Meyrowitz 1997; 1999). John Durham Peters takes this idea one step further by explaining media as ecosystems (Peters 2015, 1–12), thereby emphasizing the environment as co-constructed, and as living and mutating. This environment is kept habitable due to certain material but also immaterial conditions. Building on the work of Niklas Luhman, Bruno Latour, and Thomas Parke Hughes, Mirko Tobias Schäfer describes socio-technical ecosystems as:

> "[.,.] an environment based on information technology that facilitates and cultivates the performance of a great number of users. Design and user activities are mutually intertwined and dependent in order to improve the overall system. The term socio-technical ecosystem aims to emphasize its hybrid character and increasingly complex system-wide performance." (Schäfer 2011, 18)

The description of technology as an ecosystem fits the analytical framework of this dissertation, and subscribes to the interpretation of technology and media of the academic fields that this dissertation aligns with. By understanding platforms as ecosystems, the most important characteristics of digital platforms become visible and open to analysis, such as materiality and relationality – or relational construction – (van der Vlist 2022, 248), but also the co-constructed nature of platform media and its publics. An additional benefit is that the use of a spatial metaphor as a descriptor of a platform, is easily applicable to the concept of the public sphere, which is also a metaphorical space.

My second presupposition is that platforms should not be studied as *the sum of* their parts, but as *the formation of* their platform dimensions. This postulate derives from the work of José van Dijck and Tarleton Gillespie – who identify platform dimensions such as computation and software, technological infrastructures and hardware, affordances, content and publics, ownership and business models, and governance strategies –, in addition to Schäfer's use of the Foucauldian concept of the dispositif.[37] The dispositif refers to compositions such as platform ecosystems as networks of heterogeneous elements, discursive and non-discursive, human or non-human, related to each other by power structures (Schäfer 2011, 15-16). Thus, platform dimensions do not accumulate to a platform, but *become* in relation to each other.[38] Such a post-structuralist approach to media emphasizes the formation of power relations in and through discourse, and understands power as relational and always open to resistance. This dissertation considers the dimensions of platform technology, and all the public discourse and values they produce, as strung together by power structures

37 But also other scholars such as Zajc (2015, 29-30) and Albera and Tortajada (2012, 11)

38 For example, the economic dimension of a platform and the publics on the platform are realized through each other. And while they are a part of that platform, and studying them would contribute to our understanding of aforementioned platform, the accumulation of platform dimensions can never *be* or be described *as* the platform. You cannot confuse the map with the territory (Caplan 2016).

and economic models (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018), and analyses platform media as affected by the mediated relations of its composition.

The third and final presupposition is that platforms function as parts of larger platform ecosystems. These platform ecosystems comprise a great number of platforms interrelated through partnerships (van der Vlist and Helmond 2021), forming an assemblage of networked platforms, governed by a particular set of mechanisms (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 9; van Dijck 2021, 2804). Therefore, we need to study platforms at the ecosystem level (van der Vlist and Helmond 2021), as socio-technical ecosystems or metaphorical constructs with technological, social, economic, and political dimensions through which power is distributed. Platform ecosystems are thus embedded in larger technical and socio-economic ecosystems and infrastructures. This perspective enables me to study the structures underlying our platformized public sphere and web, and to situate and contextualize digital platforms and platform power as part of an integrated platform ecosystem, acknowledging its interrelational and dynamic structure (van Dijck, Nieborg, and Poell 2019, 4).

2.2 Analytical lens: Three levels of analysis

This research proposes a design with several analytical lenses and methodological frameworks, depending on the *level* at which the platform ecosystem is analyzed. The analytical lenses that are deployed correspond to; 1) the level of the platform as microsystem, 2) the level of the platform ecosystem, and 3) the level of the public sphere as macrosystem. My case studies analyze the first two levels of the ecosystem, and provide insights on the third level which will be discussed in the theory and conclusion chapters. An analysis of Gab at the micro-level examines it at the level of the platform, while an analysis at the meso-level examines Gab as a platform service in the larger platform ecosystem and as fringe technology in the platformized public sphere. The macro-level is that of the public sphere at large. As this dissertation will show, the "relational construction" (van der Vlist 2022, 248) of the platform changes drastically from lens to lens. Deconstructing the fringe and recomposing it as part of three different ecosystems allows for the analysis of the socio-technical, discursive, relational, and all other dimensions of the platform, at the three different levels of the public sphere (i.e. on the micro, meso, and macro level).

Chapter 3 examines Gab at the microlevel of the platform as proposed by Gillespie (2010) and Van Dijck (2013): as an ecosystem for discourse and sociality but also as a technological architecture, encompassing economics, politics, and design. This entails an analysis of all that happens on the platform, such as the activity, users, and content, but also the communication, positioning, history, affordances, business model and governance of the platform. Here, I examine how Gab functions as a social medium, and how the material and immaterial dimensions of the platform influence what that ecosystem facilitates.

The analyses at the mesolevel – of Gab as part of a larger ecosystem of services – consist of two case studies, corresponding to Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. These chapters explore Gab in a larger ecosystem of services and infrastructures. They analyze both the partner services and coalitions of Gab, as well as the push-and-pull dynamics Gab entertains with mainstream counterparts. Chapter 4 examines how Big Tech companies push not only content and users from their mainstream spaces, but also ban entire fringe platforms from the infrastructures of the platform ecosystem. Platforms need these infrastructures, technological and otherwise, to exist, profit, and disseminate their content and tropes. Chapter 5 analyses how Gab has responded to its deplatforming by replatforming. Here we see that the fringe platform establishes new infrastructures to keep afloat, while maintaining a counter position to the mainstream norms and values of the (platformized) public sphere. Whereas Chapter 4 is a narration and theorization of the disassembling of Gab's platform ecosystem, Chapter 5 contains an interpretation of Gab's attempt to reassemble a platform ecosystem.[39] These chapters show how Gab is in contention with, and dependent on, mainstream infrastructures, and shed light on the business models, ownership, norms, practices of governance, and publics of the larger ecosystem of our platformized public sphere. This reveals the adjunct services and the infrastructural connections – whether legal, technological, or semiotic – that Gab has with the mainstream web. The fringe platform is placed in a network of relations, providing insight into the underlying structures and conditions of the platformized public sphere. Through the analyses on the mesolevel I hope to harness a better understanding of the position and role of the fringe in the (platformized) public sphere.

The three case studies together examine what Gab's platform ecology looks like, how it is connected to the larger platformized public sphere, and how the push-pull dynamic between the fringe and the mainstream manifests itself technologically, economically, socially, and otherwise. Over the course of the dissertation, Gab functions decreasingly as a synecdoche, as I gradually discuss the fringe as a whole. In the concluding chapter, I use the third lens, that of the macro-level of the public sphere, including the public sphere's traditional organization and institutions, offline spheres, and legacy media. Chapter 6 explores the consequences of platformization for the public sphere, the role of fringe platforms in this platformized public sphere, and the shifting hierarchies in power they signify.

39 Despite the reference, this chapter will not use Latour's (2007) approach. The mapping of ecosystems is fundamental to this dissertation, and as a media scholar of platforms through a sociotechnical lens Latour is never far away, but I do not attempt to reassemble the social - nor the collective (Hagen 2020) - of the Gab platform. In Chapters 4 and 5, I simply trace where the fringe platform went after it had lost a vital part of its partnerships and infrastructural services.

2.3 Methodology

Each different level of analysis this dissertation embarks on requires a different spectrum of methodologies. Generally, Chapter 3 shows a methodological design consisting of quantitative and empirical analyses on the level of the platform, while Chapters 4 and Chapter 5 show a more heuristic descriptive level of Gab's attempt to stay online and obtain surrogate infrastructures. The latter chapters are analyzed at the mesolevel of the fringe in a platformized public sphere. The primary methods used for this dissertation are the reconstruction of Gab's biography; a platform infrastructure analysis; and data scraping for content and publics. Each method is explained in more detail below.

The Gab biography

The Gab biography concerns a chronological description of Gab that focusses on the platform's existence, its relation to the mainstream, and its changing nature as a platform, in the period 2016 – 2020. In this period Gab went through three distinct phases: its conception in 2016; its deplatformization in 2018, and its replatforming from 2019 onwards. These phases are captured in my three case studies. For the longest time I had the suspicion that I would be able to describe Gab's *death* as well, but at the time of writing there is no reason to assume the fringe platform will disappear soon. The construction of Gab's platform biography – for lack of a better term – has not followed the method as proposed by Burgess and Baym (2016; 2022).[40] Instead I was inspired by Callon and Law (1994)'s analysis of "technical change". In other words, I did not necessarily want to perform an actor network analysis but chose to write about the life and death of a technology. Even if I want to move beyond the analysis of a single platform, which I feel the platform biography method is best suited for, many of the assertions Burgess and Baym make, my Gab biography shares: the use of archives and user discourse (also outside of the platform); the importance of contestation; a focus on affordances and bussiness models; the admittance that the analysis is partial, and that the object of analysis is fluid and changing; the surrender to chronology, and the inevitable descriptive nature of the analysis.

Platform infrastructure analysis

To study Gab as a platform and an infrastructure, as an ecosystem and a heterogeneous network, compiled of many different dimensions, such as ownership and business models, power relations, governance strategies, and narrative, I draw on a patchwork of analytical frameworks and methods. In Chapter 3, I use the method of platform analysis as outlined by Van Dijck (2013) to understand platformization through its socio-technical and political-economic lenses. Although I roughly follow the six elements of this two-tiered analytical

40 I am embarrassed to admit that I was ignorant of the existence of this method until I got acquainted to the book *Twitter: A biography* (2022) last year.

model which will be explained in more detail at the beginning of Chapter 3, I adapt the model to a more contemporary perspective on a platform namely that of the platfomized ecosystem. Sources for this analytical inquiry are culled from the platform biography method.

In Chapters 4 and Chapter 5, I rely on an analytical framework that unites approaches from the fields of infrastructure studies and platform studies. More specifically, these chapters rely on a combination of an analysis of the platform as a company and organization – mapping its business partners and revenue streams –, with the analysis of a platform as a technology – mapping its infrastructures and partnerships with those who deliver such infrastructural services. Sources for this analytical query are financial transaction databases, company databases, company blogs, public filings, annual reports, news articles, academic articles, and research on partnership and API search. I have added tech blogs and social media posts because Gab has stopped filing annual reports since 2020[41], and has been very untransparent about its proceedings as a company.

This joined framework, which de Wilde de Ligny (2022) dubs 'platform infrastructure analysis', emphasizes the importance of API-based business partners of platforms and explains how these partners contribute to platformization (van der Vlist and Helmond 2021); in addition to providing insights into the platform ecosystem's dynamics using the concept of platform mechanisms (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2016). In chapters 4 and 5, I use this terminology to describe Gab's partnerships in the context of resilience building,[42] instead of describing these partnerships in the context of market participation. This adapted focus is informed by the idea that, as a fringe platform, Gab is not best described through its economic activity of *datafication*, *commodification*, and *selection* (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018), but through its *content liberation, exile congregation*, and *infrastructure ostracization*[43] (Zeng and Schäfer 2021), because Gab's ideological position and fringe praxis make it difficult for the platform to maintain partnerships necessary for selling data.

Data scraping and data analyses

Finally, as mentioned in the preface, a number of relevant data analyses referred to in this dissertation are performed as part of a data scraping project. In the autumn of 2018, the Utrecht Data School[44] (UDS) started a research project on the alternative radical free speech

41 See https://www.sec.gov/cgi-bin/browse-edgar?action=getcompany&CIK=0001709244&owner=exclude&count=100.

42 This term pertains to the establishment of new infrastructures with the aim to escape deplatformization.

43 The term *content liberation* refers to radical free speech policy and governance; *exile congregation* refers to accumulation of deplatformed publics, and *infrastructure ostracization* stands for deplatformization. Although I do not follow Zeng and Schäfer's (2021) terminology, I do embrace their enumeration of characteristics that define a fringe platform – which they call 'dark platforms'.

44 Since 2023 known as 'Data School'. See https://dataschool.nl/.

platform Gab.ai. The aim of this interdisciplinary research project, henceforth called 'the Gab Project' (see Preface), was to accumulate the entirety of Gab in a dataset and open it up to large-scale data analyses, as to understand the dynamics of a radical platform.

We collected around 17 million Gab posts and 770,000 Gab profiles - which is the entire platform -, as well as all other data points such as Gab groups and profile biographies. We scraped Gab with a data scraper that we designed and wrote ourselves, based on the back-end API that the Gab platform used to retrieve data. We would give the scraper a datapoint, such as a Gab profile, from which it would 'crawl' over all connected datapoints - users, groups, posts -, that would subsequently function as input, until no new datapoints were received. The scrape, which had several iterations, started on 24 February 2019 and ran until 20 March. The scraper was written in Python, and the data was stored in a MongoDB database. The data,[45] output, as well as the code and analyses[46] are made available.

Subsequent to the scraping, the research team performed several analyses, namely a hashtag analysis to determine topics; a hyperlink analysis to determine sources; an activity analysis to determine active users; a retweet analysis (or *reGab* analysis) to determine network, community, discourse and prominent users; analyses of the groups to determine the non-radical and non-political activity on Gab; text analyses to analyze toxicity levels;[47] LDA modelling to analyze themes and/or topics, and finally the team counted general platform metrics, and performed several network analyses. In this dissertation I refer several times to the Gab project, mainly when referring to data analyses. In those instances, I specify the referred to analysis and contextualize it within the chapter.

3. Aims, contributions, and challenges

This dissertation argues that an inquiry into fringe platforms shows that the existence and performance of these radical technologies signifies a contestation that goes beyond the alt-right communities on platforms such as 8chan or Gab, hate speech and political radicalism, right to the heart of a much larger discussion. The platformization of our systems of information and communication and the web as a whole undermines the supposed public nature and democratic function of those spaces. Academic researchers face new challenges, and must formulate new goals, to understand, create, and protect our public spaces, and advance the public values of the platformized public sphere (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2016, 12–13).

45 At request.

46 Github to the project https://github.com/CentreForDigitalHumanities/gabber.

47 Through the HateSonar script https://github.com/Hironsan/HateSonar.

3.1 Aims and contributions: Studying the thing by looking at its margins

In line with my main research questions, this dissertation aims: 1) to describe and analyze the new actors in the platform ecology called fringe platforms, 2) to interpret what the contestation between the fringe and mainstream signifies for our spaces of deliberation and information, and 3) to investigate what the platformization of our communication and information channels and their infrastructures means for public deliberation and participation online. The contributions of this research are numerous, but are to be categorized in three major strands namely, contributions to our understanding of these new radical platform technologies, theoretical contributions to the study of platformization and the public sphere, and finally the analytical contribution of the fringe lens.

First, by studying fringe platforms, this research generates insight into how fringe technologies influence the plane of democratic deliberation that is called the public sphere, and relate this to the platformization of our communication and information services. While the analyses of Gab and the fringe platform ecology are valuable contributions in themselves, the study of the relationship between the fringe and the MsSM ecosystem is the major contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of social media platforms in the context of their infrastructures. Findings might subsequently provide answers on the issues of governmentality and public values in the (platformized) public sphere.

Second, the introduction of the concepts *fringe platforms* and the *platformized public sphere*, allow for new questions and new perspectives on the dynamics of platform ecosystems and the public sphere, specifically with regards to platform power, platformization, contestation, publicness, and infrastructures. Through the concept of the platformized public sphere, contemporary insights into the field of platform studies are related to questions on publicness and political participation. In the way Yochai Benkler suggested the concept of 'networked public sphere' (Benkler 2006) to express the transformation of the public sphere with the rise of the web, and how the democratic and public conditions change as a consequence of this transformation, I suggest the 'platformized public sphere' to investigate the consequences of platformization for our online spaces of information and public deliberation. The concept of 'fringe platforms' – which describes technologies that are at the fringes of our platformized public sphere ideologically, infrastructurally, and in terms of power – allows for a perspective of contention instead of hegemony, shifting attention to the margins instead of the center of the ecosystem.

Third, the importance of our online spaces of public deliberation is considered self-evident, so why move to the margins of the internet to study the whole? Significantly, fringe platforms and mainstream platforms do not constitute separate spaces. They are part of the overarching platform ecosystem which contains both mainstream and fringe platforms, hosts both mainstream and fringe communities, provides mainstream and fringe content, and incorporates traditional and 'new' media outlets. Fringe platforms and mainstream platforms are thus interconnected, their spheres overlap, and their ideological positioning is

captured in a power dynamic. If we want to understand the ecosystem of the public debate, ignoring the periphery would not just overlook those – perhaps marginal – fringes, but would also rob us of important perspectives on the center. An investigation of the infrastructures and organization of the entire social media platform (eco)system that focuses on the (infrastructural) relations between the fringe and the mainstream is thus inevitable. Additionally, radical platform technologies embody and propose radically different models of online deliberation and governance, which are worth our attention. The choice of focusing on the fringes of the web, not as a radical or marginal space, but as informative for the larger platformized public sphere, is the major intervention of my dissertation and is best captured in the phrase 'studying the thing by looking at its margins'. The application of this fringe lens is the third major contribution of my research.

3.2 Challenges, cracks, and caveats

This research faces several challenges, most importantly the radicalism of my object. As exemplified in the opening section, white supremacist terrorist attacks count on mainstream actors to investigate and disseminate their radicalism.[48] For these fringe communities, the grabbing of attention, the disruption of a rational and honest dialectic and the furtherment of a meme, are goals in themselves. It is my responsibility to relate to these abject and destructive aims in a manner that does not perpetuate their toxicity, platform their ideas, or validate their conspiracies. Sometimes this means that I must remain unspecific. Although I do have in-depth knowledge of the tropes, memes, jokes and underlying culture that these practices are part of, and even though they can serve as spectacular illustrations of my argument, I choose – at times – to withhold details. I will for instance not detail the memes, nor name most killers, since I do not wish to contribute to such aims, and moreover it is not necessary for this dissertation to do so.

Another decision that flows from the political nature of my object, is that I will not frame these groups and ideas as 'one among many'. Fringe communities that disseminate far-right extremism, white supremacy, antisemitism, and violent misogyny deserve to be judged differently from fringe communities that are radical without the dissemination of hate speech. The aims of the far-right are not the same as, for example, anarchist tech communities. The horseshoe theory is false, and explains away the consequences that far-right ideology has for many different communities and identities. This is why I want to be clear that we are dealing with violent and illiberal extremism here, and that I condemn and oppose the far-right, openly and vehemently. If I were to withhold verdict in order to uphold a guise of neutrality, I would open up my dissertation to the possibility of false equivalences. Even though their legitimacy as political extremism is not the topic of this dissertation, the crack

48 See section 1.1 of this chapter, and more specifically footnote 18 on trolling normies and footnote 19 on chain terrorism, for further detail.

they represent in our platformized public sphere is. The concept of fringe platforms might be the best example of this. This concept frames these new radical platform technologies as counter- or anti-hegemonic technologies. This frame of contestation allows me to study them as an entry point through which the whole of the platformized public sphere is analyzed. However, this does not mean that I frame these violent white supremacists and patriarchal platforms as 'repressed' or part of a 'resistance'. What I study are the dynamics of power and technology in the public sphere without necessarily subscribing to any white or male fragility of these entities and their publics.

2 The fringe platforms of the platformized public sphere
Theorizing radical technology platforms as part of the online public sphere

1. Introduction

In this dissertation, I introduce new concepts and terminology that require further explanation and theorization. The aim of this second chapter is threefold: the first goal is to explain the two theoretical terms I propose in this dissertation, 'fringe platforms' and 'the platformized public sphere'. The second goal is a necessary corollary to the first, namely an integration of these new terms with the already existing theory, concepts, and critiques. These goals force me to go back and forth between writing about the public sphere as it exists – consisting of our systems of information and communication, the publics, and the press among other things –, and a meta-discourse on how the concept of the public sphere has been used in academic theory, and how such usage shapes our understanding of the actual spaces of information and deliberation. The reason for this vacillation is that the concept of the public sphere functions as a screen[49] on which we project our visions of how we ideally want media, publics, and democracy to function. The duplicity of the concept can cause confusion when the prescription and description of the public sphere amalgamate. For precisely that reason, my explanation of the concepts proposed in this chapter and dissertation – which account for the transformations of the actual public sphere, and are thus *descriptive* –, also warrants an explanation of how these new concepts fit the old conceptualizations of the public sphere, some of which might be *prescriptive*. That brings me to the third goal of this chapter: to engage with critiques of the public sphere, I need to explicate this dissertation's theoretical positions and assumptions with regard to these criticisms, and apply them to my revamped concepts.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: after an introduction into the relatively new phenomena of radical platforms (2.1), I explain my definition of fringe publics (2.2), and subsequently distinguish several different categories of such fringe platforms (2.3).

49 Here, I deliberately evoke Freud's idea of 'screen memory' in order to underline that the idealization of historical iterations of the public sphere, such as Habermas' bourgeois public sphere, are acts of distortion. This statement becomes clear in Sections 2 and 3.

Secondly, I will discuss the public sphere as theoretical concept (3.1), the transformation of journalism as a consequence of social media (3.2) and the process of platformization (3.3). In this section I elaborate on the value of my concept of 'the platformized public sphere' (3.4). Finally, in the third section, I interact with critiques of Habermas, and public sphere theory (4.1), and use these criticisms to position this dissertation, including the new concepts, within the tradition of public sphere theory (4.2/4.4).

When integrating 'platformization' and 'fringe platforms' with public sphere theory, I hope to convince the reader not only of the applicability of these concepts – to public sphere theory –, but also of their necessity to keep the theoretical framework contemporary and viable. I consider the concept of the public sphere as indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic political practice (Fraser 1990, 57). Moreover, I also claim that in order to make it germane to the contemporary online, we have to do away with idealized versions of the concept.[50] The public sphere should be conceptualized as a contestable space that includes the role of Big Tech and the illiberal. Especially the latter is controversial. Therefore, in Section 4, I explain and justify the application of the theoretical framework of the public sphere to far-right publics. This section is called 'New wine into old bottles makes the bottle break', because new phenomena can put a strain on existing theory. Likewise, the new concepts I propose might break the old normative mold of the public sphere. I argue that we need a revision of the theoretical framework of the public sphere in order for it to account for interrelated phenomena such as platformization, contention, fragmentation, power, and discourse.

2. Fringe platforms

2.1 The emergence of radical free speech platforms

For many years, radical and dissenting voices managed to exploit the distribution power of social media platforms as 'neutral conduits'. It allowed their fringe position to be pushed towards the mainstream, where it settled in public discourse and political office. Since 2016, however, administrative and public pressure forced mainstream social media (MsSM) platforms to take responsibility for their spaces (United Nations 2019), and take action against hate speech (Fioretti 2018) and fake news (Mosseri 2017). Consequently, content removal increased, and users were banned from Twitter, YouTube, and other social media services. While it might have been Silicon Valley's attempt to avoid lawful action and constitute a notion of self-regulation, the intensified moderation had not been without premise. The

50 I refer to the tendency to characterize all that is not *democratically beneficial* as outside of the public sphere. For example, instead of reviewing how public sphere theory complies with far-right activists, the latter are considered as not part of the public sphere, and therefore eliminated from the analyses. I come back to this point in Section 4.

content and talking points of some communities were considered offensive by many other users who wanted to use social media for more mainstream, and less polarizing, purposes. Users who entered political debate on social media were often exposed to radical views and offensive opinions, and in some cases experienced aggression in the form of trolling, threats, and other types of harassment which seem to flourish in these fringe communities. Intensified moderation has by no means stopped harassment on mainstream social media.[51] At best it acknowledged a role for the social media platforms in establishing what is tolerated in plain view, and what should move to more peripheral spaces. Not necessarily to the dark web[52], but out of the center of attention or mainstream.

Some affected user groups criticized the basis and praxis of the moderation and called it censorship of what was perceived as a neutral and open forum. As a way of pushing back against the moderation by the MsSM, numerous alternative platform services became manifest (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018, 1). There is for example Voat, a Reddit alternative where banned subreddits such as "Pizzagate"[53] and "Fatpeoplehate" are allowed (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 25); the crowdfunding service Hatreon which finances users that create content too controversial for Patreon (Malter 2017); and also the Twitter surrogate Gab.com. By providing spaces for conversations outlawed on other platforms (Bennett 2018), these platforms for the deplatformed[54] position themselves as alternative services for those

51 Even though the general consensus is that removing an actor and his content from a platform works in the sense that the removed actors will no longer have the same amplification they used to have (Koebler 2018), this is only true for influential or even professional actors. A horde of trolls that just aims to be present and active can easily make a new profile after removal, and continue to transgress. More about this in Chapter 3.

52 The Merriam-Webster definition of the dark web is "the set of web pages on the World Wide Web that cannot be indexed by search engines, are not viewable in a standard web browser, require specific means (such as specialized software or network configuration) in order to access, and use encryption to provide anonymity and privacy for users" ('Dark Web' 2022). This means that the dark web is a private global computer network that enables users to conduct anonymous transactions while hiding their location (Ghappour 2017). The anonymity has obvious benefits for those who conspire to commit crime, terrorism, and espionage; however, the dark web is not only used for criminal purposes. It is also used by journalists and dissidents, activists and others who depend on a certain amount of privacy from governments (Finklea 2015). Nevertheless, the dark web is relatively small; with around 45,000 sites it accounts for less than 0.01% of the internet (Chertoff 2017).

53 A famous conspiracy theory which resulted in a shooting. Most mainstream services banned these discussions afterwards.

54 Deplatforming, or no-platforming, means to deny, ban, or remove someone from a 'stage' or any other type of platform. This does not necessarily have to be a digital platform, since it also applies to, for example, uninviting certain speakers to university campuses. However, the term has become synonymous with banning profiles from social media. The concept has only entered the mainstream public debate since 2018, which has been labelled as 'the Year of Deplatforming' (Reynolds 2018; McCullagh 2019). More on this in Chapter 3.

who disagree with the conditions that MsSM platforms impose on speech. Predominantly focusing on 'alt-right'[55] communities, these spaces have attracted a collage of extreme-right, rebellious youth and internet culture, housing far-right publics.

These new radical technologies that gained notoriety due to the toxic practices of their users, their role in disseminating radicalism and hate speech, and their connection to (far-right) terrorist attacks, are worth investigating. Radical (closed) groups on mainstream social media and radical threads on forums cannot necessarily be considered as something new, as they have always had a place in the public sphere.[56] What is new is the low threshold for extensive distribution that platformized media offer, the potential to bypass the traditional institutionalized gatekeepers of the public sphere, and therefore the ease with which the radical is pushed from periphery to center. These platforms are not only harboring extremism, they are also in many cases designed to refuge users and content before they are again disseminated towards the multitude of audiences of the mainstream spaces. Some can even be considered to function as weaponized media in the struggle for attention that is the online public debate. These spaces serve as base or fulcrum from where the deplatformed can be reinserted in the center of (online) public life.

Much of the academic research conducted on the phenomenon of alternative social media services investigates these services as online radicalism and conspiracy (Rieger et al. 2021; Zeng and Schäfer 2021) or as alt-right spaces (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018; Zhou et al. 2019; Munn 2019), and sometimes as online countercultural vernacular and antagonism (De Zeeuw and Tuters 2020; Hagen et al. 2020). Other academic work that engages with far-right and alt-right spaces does so to further understand the power relations on the web and the online public sphere (Donovan 2019; Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg 2019; Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021). My work aligns with the latter. This research focusses on digital infrastructures, spheres, and ecosystems. It requires new terminology which opens up the analysis of these alternative platform services in relation to mainstream social media services and Big Tech companies, and as part of the larger dynamics in the public sphere. I have dubbed these peripheral spaces 'fringe platforms'.

2.2 Defining fringe platforms

The term 'fringe'[57] means edge, border, margin, or periphery, and is used as a descriptor for outskirts or outsiders. A public, network, or community can be fringe due to its non-

55 Definitions of the 'alt-right' and the 'far-right' are all given in Chapter 1, footnote 10 and footnote 32.

56 Hate groups and white supremacist networks have been active online since the 1990s (Burris, Smith, and Strahm 2000).

57 Fringe as a noun: Early 14c., "ornamental bordering; material for a fringe," from Old French *frenge* "thread, strand, fringe, hem, border" (early 14c.), from Vulgar Latin **frimbia*, metathesis of Late Latin *fimbria*, from Latin *fimbriae* (plural) "fibers, threads, fringe," which is of uncertain origin. Its meaning as "a border, edge" is from the 1640s. The figurative sense of "outer edge, margin" was first recorded in 1894.

normative identity, for example the transgender community, or due to unconventional or marginal politics or ideology, such as flat earthers or anarchists. A divergence from the mainstream can coincide with or cause a fringe position, outside of (the center of) attention and/or care, or at the periphery of a structure. An example of this is the way society tends to push homeless people or sex workers out of sight, sometimes quite literally to the physical borders of a city. The concept of the fringe relies on a spatial metaphor for a position opposite a mainstream. It shapes an – ideological – plane where power occupies the center. The use of a spatial metaphor for ideology is not unprecedented; when Finchelstein (2019; 2021) explains the geographical and ideological journey of World War II fascism towards the contemporary far-right, he allocates the concept of 'the margins' to characterize 1960s, 70s and 80s fascist movements and populist regimes outside of western Europe and north America. This research wants to expand the terminology of the fringe to platforms, to characterize technologies that are at the fringes of the Web, ideologically, infrastructurally, and in terms of power.

The terminology of the fringe applied to social media is not completely novel although a fixed definition of fringe social media platforms is still missing. In the last decade, the field of media studies – as well as the field of political radicalism and terrorism – reserved the term fringe to describe a pallet of (alt-right) communities, services, or ideas (Barkun 2017; Zannettou, Caulfield, et al. 2018; Woolley, Pakzad, and Monaco 2019; Rieger et al. 2021; Schulze et al. 2022). A few contributions use the potential of the term by exploring the peripheral character it possesses. For example Bail (2012) speaks of the "fringe effect" as a descriptor of institutional amplification of something that is not mainstream, that alters mainstream discourse. Open Intelligence Lab Amsterdam (OILab 2019) uses the concept of "fringe perspectivism" as a "a cross-platform method denoting how fringe discussion fora can be used as measures of ideological discussion within mainstream platforms". And finally Julia Ebner (2019) uses it to describe platforms that are "popular forums beyond the known Silicon Valley social media platforms and serve as engine-rooms for Internet culture". Especially the latter two descriptions evoke my use of the concept of fringe platforms, as well as my approach of *studying the thing by looking at its margins*. I define fringe platforms as:

> alternative platform services that were established as an explicit critique of the ideological premises and practices of mainstream platform services that attempt to cause a shift in the norms of the platform ecology they contest by offering an ideologically different technology.

Fringe as an adjective: by 1809. Fringe as a verb: late 15c., "decorate with a fringe or fringes". This etymology is taken in its entirety from https://www.etymonline.com/word/fringe, visited 22 December 2022.

The examples of fringe platforms given thus far in this dissertation facilitate rightwing extremism[58], but the terminology of fringe platforms is not reserved for such political affiliation. Rather, what is indicative of fringe platforms is an anti-establishment or subversive nature. Such a dissident attitude is not only reflected in the political radicalism on some of these platforms, but, more importantly, in the explicit contestation these platforms perform towards their mainstream counterparts. In some cases, this results in a fringe social medium filled with conspiracy theories, while other fringe technologies allow users to raise valid critiques of the major social media platforms, for example for their monopolizing tendencies, the opaqueness of their decision making, and their – at times – disregard for local contexts and/or public interests. Consequently, this dissertation refuses to define fringe platforms as 'alt-right', nor will it reserve the label solely for platforms with a far-right political affiliation. Rather, 'fringe platforms' refers to a diverse group of platform technologies with a wide array of underlying ideologies and core issues, for example open-source ideals or user privacy.

My focus on the contesting character of fringe platforms attributes the term 'fringe' to platform services founded for the purpose of challenging the norms of the mainstream social media platforms by offering a space with different norms. Conversely, a service cannot be called fringe without it being polemic, and explicitly contests the ideological premises of its (hegemonic) competitors. In order for a platform to be a fringe platform, it needs to contest the normativity of a mainstream social media service, and strive for, the earlier mentioned, renegotiation of the governance of this space. Thus, fringe platforms are not just another social medium.[59] Based on these assertions, this research distinguishes four characteristics to further define fringe social media platforms:

1. They are not a mainstream platform and are not owned by one, meaning that a fringe platform can never be the hegemonic or dominant platform for a specific service, because;
2. they are explicitly challenging the ideological norms (and governance) of mainstream platforms, and
3. they position themselves as an alternative to a dominant ideology that dominates the online public sphere, and provide a safe haven for users for which the mainstream platforms are not inclusive based on their governance and thereby
4. they attempt, through their very presence and explicit criticism, to move – or stretch – the ideological premises of the (social media) platform ecology somewhat to their own ideological position, thereby influencing what is considered natural or mainstream.

58 Although most of the radical free speech services deny that they align with far-right views, claiming an allegiance to free speech instead.

59 Therefore, an Internet radio service such as Stitcher Radio can be considered an alternative to the Apple podcast app but not as a fringe platform, since it conforms to all the hegemonic platform logics of datafication, commodification, moderation, and so on.

2.3 Categorizing fringe platforms

A preliminary empirical investigation into the phenomenon of fringe platforms shows a wide palette of alternative services the majority of which do not fit the label of alt-right (or far-right), but are contesting the rules and moderation practices of the big mainstream social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram).[60] I distinguished two major clusters of contestation and several smaller clusters[61] that reject clean categorization. The most notorious cluster focusses on the right to free speech and the rejection of the top-down moderation by the MsSM platforms. The other major group of fringe platforms are 'decentralized services' or 'decentral fringe platforms'.

The free speech fringe platforms cluster is defined as 'contesting the current moderation of speech and expression by the mainstream social media platforms'. The largest fraction, which includes most examples given so far, rejects the moderation of 'hateful content'. These radical free speech platforms and their communities consider the reigning terms of service as an impairment on free debate. Conversely, another (very small) group of free speech fringe platforms in this cluster advocate a 'hate free' online environment. These fringe platforms are, similarly to Gab and 8chan, built out of dissatisfaction with the moderation practices of the MsSM spaces, but are on the opposite side of the argument. They advocate for a more rigorous commitment to the governance of the public space. A third faction of the free speech fringe platforms demand the right to show – and thereby de-police or de-sexualize – the female body and bodily functions. These fringe platforms are often feminist services that align themselves with movements like 'free the nipple', the affiliated 'normalize breastfeeding', and 'the menstrual movement' (or other 'free bleeding' advocates). I also include Switter in this category, a safe Twitter alternative for sex workers. While they contest the top-down moderation, or censorship, of the MsSM, they do not condone racism, sex-

60 Preliminary research found 132 alternatives for Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, YouTube, and Reddit, that would fit the description of fringe platforms, and another 46 fringe services that were alternatives to other platforms such as Wikipedia, WordPress, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn.

61 The most notable coherent cluster of services can best be described as *fringe platforms that provide alternatives to the United States dominated platform media*. These services have such a different national context that they refuse to abide by the ideology of Silicon Valley and found a platform that suits their own local requirements. As of now predominantly Russian fringe platforms are identified, but Israeli, Middle Eastern and Chinese fringe platforms are expected to be present as well. Implicit to this statement is a Western centric view. This research does position the American Silicon Valley platform media as the mainstream; however, in a Chinese national context for example, a state technology can hardly be considered as fringe. The term fringe points to a power relation and as such is context dependent. However, the terminology and definition of fringe can be transferred to other contexts since it acknowledges such relations of power.

ism, and antisemitism like Gab and 8chan do.[62] The founding of these feminist free speech fringe platforms is most likely a reaction to the stricter moderation of nudity on Tumblr.

The second cluster consists of decentral fringe platforms. In a similarly explicit and vocal manner, the decentral fringe platforms contest the power and control of MsSM platforms over online public life; yet they object to different aspects of the MsSM hegemony. These fringe platforms disagree with how the allocation of power, control, and capital on the mainstream platforms always converges to a central point. In contrast to their monarchic mainstream counterparts, decentral fringe platforms present themselves as a federation.[63] A decentral platform lacks one central party that controls the flow of information or the storage of data. This has major implications for user privacy and/or distribution of revenue. The cluster of decentral fringe platforms is an umbrella category of several groups, technologies, and ideologies. As we will see in Chapter 5, these fringe platforms also overlap with open-source communities.[64]

By taking Gab as its object of analysis, this research zooms in on the radical free speech cluster[65]of social media fringe platforms. It focusses on the contestation over the (online) spaces of the public debate, also called the public sphere,[66] where the public informs itself, citizens communicate with each other and express themselves as political actors. Free speech platforms that support a less hateful online will not be part of this research, and neither will free speech fringe platforms that advocate for less censorship of the female body.[67] This choice comes with the acknowledgement that some findings are specific for Gab, or to the radical free speech fringe, or even to social networking and microblogging services. There are other categories – or clusters – of fringe platforms that have their own specific dynamics with regard to the mainstream services and the platform ecology, but there are

62 Additionally, the radical free speech platforms are frequently conservative in terms of nudity. Despite all the advocating for free speech, Gab does not mirror unambiguously a Larry Flint stance, in that it is not – for example – porn positive. Feminist platforms have a very different interpretation of free speech and expression than radical free speech platforms, which relativizes the claims of Gab that they are 'free speech absolutists'.

63 Peer-to-peer sharing platforms, or cryptocurrency are examples of decentralized technology. However, not all platforms that include such technology are organizationally truly 'decentral'.

64 In Chapter 5 these services are explained as part of several tech movements and communities called the FLOSS communities. This categorization is based on the specific element of Big Tech that the fringe platforms challenge and subvert.

65 At least until the radical free speech fringe encounters other fringe communities, as is the case in the third case study displayed in Chapter 4.

66 In this context, the 'public sphere' can be interpreted as: 'the spaces of a democratic society where the public debate takes place'. Section 3 of this chapter elaborates on the concept of the public sphere.

67 Although Gab sometimes seems to advocate the removal of censorship on nudity, this seems to be more focused on the right to host and show pornography then on the normalization of the female body and bodily functions such as menstruation.

also other types of fringe services that are not social media, that have traits and dynamics that are specific to the service they provide. However, the central characteristic of fringe platforms – the process of contestation towards the hegemonic norm on mainstream social media platforms through the manifestation of (socio-technological) alternatives – should be generalizable over all these different clusters.

My categorization of fringe platforms is different from the only other instance in academic literature (Ebner 2019) that defines fringe platforms. Here, fringe platforms are a subcategory of "Alt-tech"[68], and are predominantly defined as "outsider platforms". Judging from the examples that are given, such as the /pol boards on 4chan or 8Chan, these services are outsiders because they are hotbeds for the far-right. Conversely, I argue that there are several different ideological fringes that share an opposition towards Big Tech and its overdetermination and monopolization of the Web but are not necessarily allies due to conflicting politics. This opposition is also expressed in the construction of alternative services, and the technological design of those services, alongside discourse and other manners of garnishing contrast and opposition. Thus, my definition and categorization are built upon the idea of *contention towards a powerful mainstream*, not a radical political position towards a centrist political position.

3. The platformized public sphere

3.1 The public sphere

The space of democratic participation where the contestation between the fringe and mainstream takes place is referred to as the public sphere. The public sphere (Habermas 1991) is the conceptual space of a society where 'the public' informs itself, deliberates among itself and communicates its ideas to the decision makers in the societal institutions of the state. In this discursive arena citizens discuss matters of common concern (Wessler 2019, 6). The concept of the 'public sphere' gained prominence through the work of Jürgen Habermas who used it in his *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Habermas 1990). It became *the* terminology to talk about mediated political discourse by citizens.[69] Through it, western societies echo democratic ideals for political participation and decision making informed by the enlightenment.

Habermas was not the first, nor the only one, to use the term, but he was among the first to point out the intimate connection between the existence of a public sphere and the foundations of democratic society (Boeder 2005). The formulation and circulation of public

68 I will come back to the concept of 'Alt-tech' in Chapter 5.

69 When the *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* was published in 1962 in German, it had relatively little impact on the Anglo–American debate. This all changed predominantly with the 1989 publication of the English translation called *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Boeder 2005).

opinion would serve the interests of citizens, place state policy and actions as an object of criticism and reflection, and spur the development of democratic institutions (Wessler 2019, 15). Habermas therefore suggests that, without a functioning public sphere, the system of representation and democratic decision making cannot function. The legitimacy of governmental policy and governance would be in crisis, because the public would not recognize themselves in the institutions of society (Castells 2008, 79). Through Habermas' writings, the public sphere became the conceptual space that is considered instrumental for the role of political discourse in an open democratic society, and for the relation between the government and the governed.

For something to count as *the public*, it needs to transcend the private domain of self-interest, and signify shared interests and values (Dewey 1954), usually by some social organization (Castells 2008, 91). In order to accomplish and legitimize a common discourse, *the public* in the public sphere should thus be relatively autonomous from the state and the economy. For Habermas, only a separate "informally mobilized body of nongovernmental discursive opinion" (Fraser 1990, 75), stemming from the 'civil society' - or *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (Habermas 1989) - can serve as a counterweight to the state and the market. A civil society consists of private citizens that make up all kinds of advocacy groups (Downey and Fenton 2003, 192), like grassroots organizations, community groups, labor unions, religious groups, and other interest groups (Castells 2008, 83). The relationship between government and civil society, mediated through their interaction in the public sphere, defines the governmental and societal polity (Castells 2008). It is for this reason that the manner in which 'the public' is organized as a civil society, is of great importance for a democracy. The way productive societal discourse and policy making depends on the quality of the public sphere, the political public sphere depends on the quality of organization of the civil society. Importantly, the media, through which citizens commune, are also a defining part of civil society. I return to the concept of civil society in the next section.

What would a public sphere that nurtured and sustained "vigorous democratic practice" (Ferree et al. 2002, 289) look like? For Habermas, the aspiration for deliberation was rational-critical discourse.[70] The inclusion of diverse and opposing views is herein considered vital to a functioning public sphere and democratic society (Dewey 1954; Habermas 1991). Still, the desired outcome would be agreement, which should yield from uninhibited and diverse debate over public affairs. To guarantee diversity, access to the public sphere

70 According to Habermas, rational-critical discourse should allow for participants to exchange critique, and be critical of normative positions and dogma's by being reflexive of others and one's own presumptions. Participants would attempt to understand the larger social and cultural context from which both sides of the argument originate, and would practice ideal role-taking in order to empathize. Lastly, speakers should talk on a basis of sincerity and authenticity, and should be committed to the common good. This way, when engaging in the practice of deliberation about the common good, they form one sphere, all sharing the goal of discussing the common interest.

must be open for any party affected by the issue at stake, and participants must be able to suggest topics and deliberate freely (Habermas and Rehg 2001; Zamith and Lewis 2014, 3). When entering the forum of the public sphere, participants are supposed to leave their societal status behind as if they were social equals, so that anyone has access to that which is discussed. This ought to ensure that the better argument triumphs over social hierarchy (Dean 2001, 244).

Scholars assumed that a medium like the internet, which has a low threshold for participation and therefore a relatively high diversity in participants, would enhance democratic participation, while still meeting the normative standards of rational-critical, equal, and informed deliberation, set by Habermas (Albrecht 2006; Zamith and Lewis 2014, 3). Now, forty years after the birth of the internet, most social media users would recognize a dissonance between the experience of (online) public discourse and the Habermassion expectations of it. The flame wars we encounter in the shout-and comment boxes, or the cacophony present on our feeds cannot possibly pass as rational-critical deliberation. Just as the product-placing influencers, the politically employed 'intellectuals' and the Eastern European troll farms that spread waves of disinformation can hardly be considered as 'the public'. Additionally, how can women and minorities enter the arena as social equals, when they are targeted because of their identities and societal status (Mantilla 2013; Tillman 2014; Shepherd et al. 2015)? In an open letter, one of the fathers[71] of the Web, Tim Berners-Lee, urges his brainchild to come out of its adolescence. He cites misinformation and the low-quality discourse as major concerns (Berners-Lee 2019). We have to conclude that the web has not provided the heterogeneous, logical, and coherent deliberation that was to flourish in such an open public sphere (Zamith and Lewis 2014, 2).

Through history, the emergence of new technologies, social movements, and political changes have urged an ongoing re-articulation of the role of the 'public sphere' in democratic decision making and political representation. Democratic theory places great emphasis on the role of public communication in facilitating or hindering these processes (Ferree et al. 2002, 289). A change in our systems of communication and information, like the rise of a new medium, can change the organization of the public sphere**.** Especially the role of the press, or the 'Fourth Estate', is both dependent on, and a determinant of, the public sphere. The changes the Web has instigated in our communication and information system and the way in which the (news) media have changed with it, are key in understanding the discrepancy between a rational-critical public sphere and toxic media platforms such as Gab.

71 The other one is Robert Cailliau.

3.2 A transforming Fourth Estate

Allegedly, Edmund Burke[72] not only coined the term 'Fourth Estate', by which he referred to the public press or news media, but also termed it the most important of all four estates. Because it was journalism that mediated between the other three estates: state authority, private interests, and the people[73] (Carlyle 1840). As such, Burke saw journalism as vital to a working democracy. Through the terminology of the Fourth Estate, the primary task of journalism is expressed, namely to inform the people and the government on democratic processes, and stand against those who try to exploit it with falsehoods and secrecy. It is thus positioned opposite the government, as a watchdog of democracy, and aligned with the people, as a representative and educational force (Hampton 2009, 3-6). Just like the public sphere, the Fourth Estate is not only a real and functioning force within western democracy, it is also a concept through which those western democracies voice their democratic ideals. This means that the concept refers to both an ideal – the role we want the press to play in our democracy –, and an actual situation – the role the press plays in our democracy.

Traditionally, members of the Fourth Estate, such as journalists and editors, were the primary gatekeepers[74] of the news with a distinct form of media power. Most mass media outlets had a limited amount of time and space in which they could distribute their content; therefore, these institutions had to make selections. These choices were informed by the professional values, quality standards, ideological background, and perspectives of the gatekeepers (DeFleur 2016, 148–58), as well as by market incentives, the public demand, and the regulatory frames of governmental bodies. In addition to the internal selection process of every separate publishing institute, the Fourth Estate as a sector and institution, independent of the state, also upheld governance, and was an important force in setting norms and standards. The result of this interplay of gatekeepers – media institutions, the sector, the public (institutions), and other regulatory bodies – effectively determined what items and actors were allowed to enter the public sphere and what tropes and publics were denied access.

While the connection between democracy and media seems obvious, since political actors depend on the media for the spreading of their message and the shaping of their image (Sheafer 2001), and citizens depend on the media to inform them on politics, the role of

72 The term appears as such in Thomas Carlyle's 1841 book *On Heroes and Hero Worship* which encompasses a series of lectures Carlyle had given the previous year. In this work he claims that Edmund Burke said, "here were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all" referring to Burke's contribution to a 1787 British parliamentary debate on the freeing up of the press (Schultz 1998).

73 This is a loose translation on my part. A more literal translation of the three estates would be the Clergy, Aristocracy, and the Commoners.

74 Gatekeeping is a term coined by Kurt Lewin (1943). It is used in communication studies as the process of screening and selecting by news organizations (DeFleur 2016).

media for civil society is less straightforward. Not only are public communications vital for public deliberation, media are also essential for democratic citizens to identify themselves as such. Only if we imagine ourselves as part of a public, and our use of media as democratic participation can we conjure the public opinion required to realize a public sphere.[75]

From the 1990s onwards, technological changes in information dissemination have caused a decline in traditional media channels such as print and broadcast news. The World Wide Web gained a substantial share of the news market, to the point that conventional news organizations are now also using it as an important infrastructure and key channel for the distribution of the news (Bruns and Highfield 2015, 2). Social media platforms in particular have overtaken some of the major distributing functions of the traditional media, as they have become important means by which news of social, political, and economic significance is produced, disseminated, consumed, and interacted with (Napoli 2019; Caplan and boyd 2016). The number of people in the western world who rely on social media such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook as a source for news is over 50% and still increasing (Barthel et al. 2015; Levy et al. 2018; Shearer and Mitchell 2021; Newman et al. 2021; 'Digital News Report. Nederland 2021', n.d.). Social media platforms have quickly overtaken television (Newman 2016) and search engines as the main channel to find news and information – although search engines remain essential (McGee 2014).[76] These changes in the media sphere have influenced the relation between consumers, content, and the Fourth Estate, but also the dynamics of media and democracy. The emergence of the so-called Web 2.0[77], signaling that the internet had become a platform for users and businesses to build on (Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck 2019) brought even more connectivity, and more spaces for information and discussion. It made not only the dissemination of news even faster and wider, it also rocketed the mediatization of everyday life to an even higher intensity (Bruns and Highfield 2015, 2-3) including new opportunities in participatory or "self-produced" media (Howard 2008). Both democracy and civil society could only be strengthened by these new media, especially the social media of Web 2.0, or so we thought.

75 Examples of this are the 'biographies' of private Twitter users, often consisting not just of references to roles they have professionally (*real-estate agent*) or domestically (*dad of 4*), but also of references to their self-perceived role on Twitter (*thorn in the side of the MSM* or *rational media sceptic* or *anti-establishment*). A social medium like Twitter needs users to identify themselves as participants in the arena of political participation in order for the medium to be just that. Likewise, a public sphere needs to be imagined for it to exist. Public communications are an important part of that imagination.

76 This is not to say that the internet or social media are now the 'leitmotif' of news distribution, but that the production, consumption, and distribution of news no longer depends solely on mass media and their institutions and outlets.

77 A term coined by Tim O'Reilly (O'Reilly 2007) which refers to a whole set of characteristic of the world wide web after the dot-com crash of 2001, most notably the two-way communication of the Web, the rise of user-friendly interfaces, and the presence of user-generated-content and social media platforms.

The web has corroded the traditional boundaries of public discourse as a new but essential part of the public sphere (Zamith and Lewis 2014). Social media platforms and messaging apps enable the sharing of news and information, and comment sections provide sites for public discussion and discourse (Caplan and boyd 2016). This led scholars to conclude that online information consumption and online discussions should also be considered as civic participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril, and Rojas 2009). However, such an expansion of the public sphere has deeply affected its very dynamics, not in the least the role of the Fourth Estate. Because technological developments have reduced the cost for distribution of information drastically, traditional news media have lost their position as sole curators, distributers, and producers of daily news and opinion. Politically motivated actors now have the opportunity to bypass the gatekeepers of traditional news media including their professional ethics, norms, and values (Bracciale and Martella 2017, 2), as well as quality standards. This diminishes the power of the press as political watchdog. Equally important is the observation that power is distributed differently on social media, causing traditional media outlets to have limited control over their content after it is published. On a social media feed, all the signifiers of a news item can be easily appropriated and framed. This affords users to easily decontextualize articles from their original source and target audience[78]– creating their own "information bricolage"[79] (Muis et al. 2019, 9–11) –, which undermines the democratic role of the Fourth Estate.[80] The traditional Fourth Estate is thus no longer the powerful gatekeeper it once was.

Thus, the transformation of our media ecology has had consequences for the press and our public sphere as such. Social media feeds, search engines, online news channels, or app stores are all run through the logic of recommendation systems and personalization, which differs from the logic of the mass media and the decisions made by editorial boards and newsrooms. This is not to say that users or consumers lack agency, but we have to acknowledge that Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Apple play a role in curating news through algorithmic mechanisms of categorization, selection, and dissemination. Practices that were formally human work, institutionalized within the Fourth Estate, are now taken up by the

78 The prestige and brand name of the sources grant these collages validity, while the author of the collage can still dispense the responsibility for the content of these sources.

79 A term coined by the article (Muis et al. 2019), combining Claude Lévi-Strauss 'bricoleur' with the concept of the collage to describe the combination of technologically enabled decontextualization, cherry-picking, and framing.

80 Politicians were shown to be gatekeepers of the Fourth Estate, instead of the other way around (Wieringa, de Winkel, and Lewis 2017; Muis et al. 2019). Processes of cherry-picking and framing give the curating and gatekeeping role to the politician. In sync with the remix culture of the Internet, a political actor uses and reuses existing pieces of content, combining 'separate artefacts, actions, ideas, signs, symbols, and styles in order to create new insights or meanings' (Deuze 2006, 70), creating their own - often very narrow - narrative that resonates with the target audience.

platform media of tech companies, their technologies, their teams, their Terms of Service, and so forth. Consequently, we increasingly seem to look to (the tech companies who own) social media platforms to be the guardians of the public debate instead of the traditional gatekeepers of the Fourth Estate. In doing so, we have partly transferred the responsibility for governance over the spaces of information and deliberation from a Fourth Estate to Big Tech companies. Such power redistribution from legacy media to platform companies – in terms of publishing context and curation, of but also in terms of governing accountability – is also dubbed as "dislocation" (Ekström and Westlund 2019, 260-261).

This dislocation has resulted in growing disenchantment with the accumulating power the giant tech companies have over the public sphere (van Dijck 2021). Privacy scandals have piled up and their handling of hate speech and fake news, as exemplified by the sudden proliferation of fringe platforms, has been scrutinized. There is a growing concern with fundamental public spaces, practices, and values unchecked in the hands of private, corporate companies. While it is true that "commercialization" of the Fourth Estate has always been a concern, most certainly from the early twentieth century onwards when the ownership of newspapers and broadcasting stations concentrated in a few competing chains (Hampton 2009, 7), the recency and expansive way in which our spaces of public information and deliberation have changed ownership, are cause for concern. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) state that there is currently no non-proprietary public space inside the corporately run social media platform ecosystem. And since these private tech companies are so dominant on the web, they have become a governing entity, effectively deciding what happens in the infosphere (Floridi 2014). As a result, private transnational hyper capitalist companies are now gatekeepers that *safeguard the online ecosystem*.

In summary, the initial expectation that the innovations of the Web 2.0, such as greater participation and *prosumption*, would be empowering and emancipatory for citizens, is now shattered and replaced by concerns over the quality of the debate, disengaging state power and the advancing privatization of our online spaces. The weakened position of the Fourth Estate and the changing dynamics of ownership and governance of the public sphere have its precipitation on the public debate, and ultimately influence our democratic participation and organization. Moreover, the aforementioned dislocation (Ekström and Westlund 2019, 260-262) exemplifies how (platform) media and technology do not only *organize* our public sphere in the strict technological sense. Business models or power dynamics of a platform technology, for instance, are just as much organizing dimensions. This is true for the Gutenberg press and Facebook alike. In order to understand the role of fringe platforms in the public sphere, we also need to understand the new dominant organization of the public sphere. The framework most explanatory of the organizational reconfigurations by major technology platforms is platformization.

3.3 Platformization

In less than a decade, technology platforms have acquired a central position in public and private life, transforming key economic sectors and civic spheres of life such as hospitality (Airbnb), transportation (Uber), the food industry (Just Eat Takeaway), retail (Amazon), entertainment (Netflix, Spotify), and education (Google Scholar and Coursera) (Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck 2019). This societal state has been dubbed a "platform society" (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2016; 2018), which refers to a society where "platforms are gateways to the ecosystems of everyday social life: automated technologies, business models, sociality and cultures of networked platforms become interwoven in wider ecosystems. These are shaped by normative mechanisms that emerge from the interplay of users and technological architectures"(Leurs and Zimmer 2017, 804). In a platform society, powerful transnational platforms have become the dominant organization in the spheres and sectors they are operating in, by introducing a new type of organization, defying the classic definitions which are tied to services or sectors, and becoming 'fluid' infrastructural services (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 19). In such a manner, infrastructural platforms have started to influence "existing societal arrangements as the ecosystem is increasingly mingling with established institutional structures" (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 21). This process in which globally operating platform businesses take over infrastructures is called 'platformization'.

Platformization or "the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web" (Helmond 2015, 1), has also transformed our information and communication services. Social media platforms are not just websites that host services, but infrastructures *through which* services are hosted. Platforms are not just instruments to create or find online content, publish or share information, and offer or sell goods; they have become the foundations of a networked media ecosystem, upon which other platforms, apps, and media channels can be built, and through which data flows are managed, processed, stored, and channeled (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 13). The outcome of this complex dynamics between users, usage, technologies, and economic models is a convergence of distributing services and media outlets on a few major platforms, and the accumulation of users, content, attention, and revenue by a few major tech companies. The dislocation (Ekström and Westlund 2019) of ownership and governance of the public sphere, as described in the previous section, exemplifies how a platformized media ecology is the current dominant model. In the western online hemisphere, the web is largely monopolized by five Big Tech companies from the United States, namely Google (Alphabet), Amazon, Facebook (Meta), Apple, and Microsoft, also known as the acronym GAFAM (van Dijck 2021, 2803).

The reason platformization is so pervasive and reconfiguring is that platform technologies have as a core characteristic, going beyond the boundaries of their own services. Because their primary economic model is data accumulation, they seek to get the rest of the web "platform ready"— which means that they are able to extract data from it – through

their application programming interfaces or 'APIs' (Helmond 2015). Additionally, Big Tech companies own many services[81] in several layers of the web, and monopolize key positions in the web infrastructure in order to further incapsulate data flows. Moreover, Big Tech platforms perform sphere transgressions (Sharon 2020; 2021), meaning that a few companies move to several different societal sectors. Through these processes of sphere transgression, trunking the tree and the centripetal and centrifugal effects,[82] Big Tech platforms are able to further control their influence over entire public sectors and public communication spheres (van Dijck 2021, 4). Platformization is thus a process of both technological expansion and economic growth of digital platforms beyond their current boundaries (Helmond 2015), into markets, industries, and societal domains (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Nieborg and Helmond 2019; Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck 2019). It has transformed our systems of media and our spaces of public deliberation and participation to such a degree, that we need to revisit the different iterations of Habermas' theory, and evaluate whether his concept can still describe our contemporary public sphere.

3.4 From a bourgeois public sphere to a platformized public sphere

Throughout Habermas' work, the public sphere is described as undergoing transformations that are closely linked to the rise of modern communication, and are shaped by the communication industry (Wessler 2019, 23).[83] Habermas heavily criticized the mass media public sphere as manufactured publicity, where citizens are not generators but mere addressees.[84] From the 1990s onwards, scholars on media, communication, and technology saw further transformations of our media sphere, which creates the need for new conceptualizations of

81 This penetration is quite extensive. Facebook, Apple, and Alphabet (known as Google) not only encompass social media sites (Instagram, Facebook), or audio and video- sharing platforms (YouTube, iTunes, 20% of Spotify), but also app services (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger), app stores (Google play, Apple Appstore), browsers (Chrome), mobile operating systems (Android, iOS), navigation and geospatial information systems (Google Maps, Google Earth), pay services (Google Wallet, Android Pay), and advertising services (AdSense), among many other things, in their ecosystems. If you complete the 'big five', and also take into account Microsoft, and Amazon, this ecosystem now also includes a relative monopoly on hardware and e-commerce (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 12-15).

82 All these processes and term are explained in detail in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

83 Habermas' *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1990) describes how during the 17th and 18th centuries the public sphere developed in coffee houses and theatres visited by intellectual debate circles, as well as through 'the world of letters' such as journals, books, and print periodicals. These media, and salons, enabled the rising bourgeois class to establish itself within politics and governance, hence the bourgeois public sphere (Wessler 2019, 15). Subsequently, Habermas identified another transformation, namely that of bourgeois society to the mass media public sphere of daily newspapers in the 19th century and film, television, and radio in the 20th century.

84 Many of Habermas' critiques of mass media, he has repeated for networked and platform media in his latest contribution (Habermas 2022).

the public sphere.[85] In his 2008 article, Castells stated that the new globalized public sphere is comprised of networked media and means of communication, and that the old framework of national public spheres and mass media no longer suffices. He proposed a new concept, one that acknowledges the Internet as the public sphere, and dubbed it the "networked public sphere", where the terminology refers to its (material) infrastructure (Castells 2008). The concept highlights networked media, while reserving a space for the presence of mass media, offline social movements, and other types of organization. Castells did not replace Habermas' public sphere theory but rather supplemented it, to deal with the increasing complexity that comes with the growing centrality of networks and changing communication systems of the internet, in the early 2000s (Friedland, Hove, and Rojas 2006).

When platformized infrastructures became the dominant organizational model for our information and communication services over the last 15 years, our public sphere transformed again. Differences in technology, social structures, and power relations all influence the way citizens consume information and practice communication, and thus influence the way in which democratic practice is enacted and public opinion is shaped. While the presence, the dominance, and infrastructuralizing power of the internet is already captured by the concept of the 'networked public sphere', there are again new dynamics that are not captured by the old terminology and theory. Therefore, I argue that we must revisit Habermas' concept and advance a new concept: *the platformized public sphere*. In the next section, I will explain how the platformized public sphere differs from the networked public sphere mentioned above and why those differences warrant a conceptual change.

As I already explained, the terminology of the networked public sphere is greatly dependent on Manuel Castells' work on the network society (Castells 1996; Castells 2004; Castells and Cardoso 2006; Castells 2007; 2008) and Yochai Benkler's work on networks (Benkler 2006). Castells suggests that the transformation in communication technologies towards networked communication also transforms our social structures, beyond the ways in which we communicate and inform ourselves. This includes knowledge itself and how we judge it, as well as who has authority to speak and who has governing power. Benkler also describes how the transition to networked communication technologies transforms markets, public space, and democracies (Benkler 2006; Friedland, Hove, and Rojas 2006). These observations are reminiscent of the descriptions of platformization in the last section. What warrants the terminology of the platformized public sphere is that while 'the net' has become no less determinant for the public sphere, the general organization of the online has changed from the network to that of the platform. What is even more important is that our

85 Not only the media themselves changed but also what they were supposed to do. Mass media such as radio, television, film, newspapers, and magazines were seen as the carriers of meaning and messages, 'providing information for voters, enticement for consumers, entertainment for workers, and ideology for dupes' (Peters 2015, 5), but contrastingly the internet is perceived as infrastructural.

conception of the public sphere, and therefore of the concept itself, has moved from a *global village* to a *colonized village*.[86]

Ostensibly, networked communications and platform technologies have influenced our media systems and public sphere in similar ways; however, the concepts *networked public sphere* and *platformized public sphere* emit very different visions on and realities of the public sphere. Firstly, the media Castells (2008) references, such as emails, SMS, blog posts, mobile phones, were – in 2008 – networked media and not platform media. Platform mechanisms work through an interplay of technologies, such as data structures, algorithms, interfaces, commercial strategies, and user practices. The technical and social dimensions of media services and/or channels adopt a platformized logic when they assimilate to the social media platform ecosystem (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 16). A public sphere that is located on social media platforms also adopts an organization that is inscribed in the technological, but also in the economic, political, and cultural infrastructures of the platform ecosystem. These are all different for platformized media as compared to networked media.

Secondly, for Castells, the concept of the networked public sphere was rooted in the context of anti-war and anti-authoritarian movements that were aided by, or even emerged from, the new systems of communication. When Castells states that 'the global civil society now has the technological means to exist independently from political institutions and from the mass media' or that "the new capacity of movements to organize and mobilize citizens in their country while calling for solidarity in the world at large" (Castells 2008, 86), he obviously channels the type of idealization that Habermas performed with his concept of the bourgeois public sphere. Similarly, Castells' qualifications of current 'networked communication' as *spontaneous, ad hoc, horizontal and autonomous networks of communication*[87] are more indicative of what we want communication to be, than what actually happens online. This normativity – mired in the earlier utopian vision of the internet as a great equalizer of all communication – is not part of my concept of the platformized public sphere. Castell's assumptions are hardly compatible with our current conceptions of the online public sphere. We experience fragmentation, polarization, and toxicity instead of a 'global village' and witness the absent and inconsistent governance by all-powerful platform

86 This is a reference to Habermas' colonization theory in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981), which is compelling but rather normative and devoid of a Marxist analysis (Jütten 2011). To complement the analysis of the colonization of the 'lifeworld', I recommend Couldry and Mejias' work on 'Data colonialism' (2019) and perhaps even to Marx' writings on *primitive accumulation* (translation of 'original' or the German 'ursprüngliche').

87 "There is a fourth type of expression of the global civil society. This is the movement of public opinion, made up of turbulences of information in a diversified media system, and of the emergence of spontaneous, ad hoc mobilizations using horizontal, autonomous networks of communication" (Castells 2008, 86).

entities instead of the coordinating problems that Castells saw. We see how private interest commodifies what is private and colonizes what is public.

Finally, the *networked public sphere* is derived from the idea that the web has a networked structure, which carries all sorts of assumptions. These assumptions make the concept a suboptimal fit with the concepts I use in this dissertation that are more aligned with the structure of the platform. A network is open but has edges, while a platform and a sphere have borders. These borders are permeable, and contiguous to – for example – other platform services, other sectors, and the offline.[88] A network seems egalitarian in its distributing power.[89] Conversely, a platform includes the understanding of a base or infrastructure, and power dynamics.[90] Moreover, the concept of the platformized public sphere captures the mainstream-fringe dynamics, and conflicts, while a networked public sphere does not. The analysis of the distribution of fringe positions and communities to a mainstream space and audience through the lens of a networked public sphere would be insufficient.

According to Comunello and Mulargia (2022), Castells' concept of the *network society* (1996) should not be considered antithetical to the centralizing tendencies of platforms, and could be complimented by a platform society perspective. They also argue that the platform ecosystem of today can be understood from the perspective of the network. I tend to disagree with this with respect to the contemporary public sphere and find it incompatible with the perspective of the fringe lens. The terminology of the platformized public sphere refers to the economic, social, and technical transformation of networked media into platformized media, which has enabled the constitution of a new public sphere that is highly privatized and monopolized, and opens up public sphere theory to new modes of analysis, critique, and perspectives, emphasizing contention, hierarchies, and dynamics. I consider the rise of fringe platforms as a reaction to the platformization of the public sphere, entailing new spaces located in its hinterland, as well as a testament to the importance of positioning power and (infra)structure at the center of one's analytical framework. The power dynamic that ensues with the presence of these radical platform technologies in a public sphere that has been monopolized under the conditions of platformization begs the questions what does *mainstream* mean in a platformized public sphere, and what terminology do we have at hand to describe the *peripheral*.

88 See also Footnote 36.

89 This might not be true according to network theory, but I think this is a correct statement in terms of how the network functions as a (spatial) metaphor. Additionally, the absence of power is a known critique of the 'flat ontology' of Actor Network Theory.

90 This is not to say that the terminology of the platform is without the obfuscation of its politics, as Gillespie aptly writes (Gillespie 2010).

4. New wine into old bottles makes the bottle break

4.1 Death of the public sphere?

Habermas' concept of the public sphere is theoretically and philosophically rich; nonetheless, it has been heavily criticized. I distinguish two types of criticism that are especially relevant for the conceptualization of the platformized public sphere: namely the lack of empirical confirmation of Habermas' ideal and the critiques of the normative dimensions of the concept. Importantly, both types of critiques make us reconsider whether the public sphere is indeed a good descriptor and measuring stick of our (online) public debate and democracy. Where the disconnect between the theory and the empirical findings might incentivize academics and policymakers to improve the digital public sphere to the norms of the concept, the fundamental critique of the concept of the public sphere as excluding and normative, prompts the need for revising of the theory itself.

The critique concerning the lack of empirical confirmation gained traction when disappointment about the web as a public sphere rose. Many scholars assumed that a low threshold for participation would enhance and diversify democratic participation, while still meeting the normative standards of rational-critical, equal and informed deliberation, as set by Habermas (Albrecht 2006; Zamith and Lewis 2014, 3). Twenty-five years after the birth of the web, the expectations of the public sphere are in dissonance with our empirical experiences as users and citizens. The abundance of toxicity, hate speech, fake news, political propaganda, and conspiracy theories have compromised our anticipation for the idealized public sphere to such extent that we can question whether we can still speak of a public sphere.[91] Especially the proliferation of far-right and conspiratory content on radical free speech fringe platforms such as Gab or 8chan chafes against any normative interpretation of the concept.[92] Furthermore, the monopolization of communication infrastructures by private interests – while the state and its institutions have largely retreated as governing institution from the web – are experienced as a loss of civil and public space.

The second category of critique, on the normative character of the concept of the public sphere, is even more fundamental. This critique pertains that the gap between Habermas' description of the public sphere and the actual experienced public sphere is not only intrinsic

91 Even Habermas himself has become skeptical. In an 2018 interview, a pessimistic Habermas seems to imply he no longer sees 'the public' that is needed for a functioning public sphere and asserts that the Internet diluted the classical configuration of the liberal public sphere, where the media directed the public to topics that were relevant for the formation of political opinion, and assumed the public to find its way to independent media of quality, and be accustomed to the conflictive process of opinion forming. Similar to what previous sections of this chapter have concluded, Habermas blames the eroding influence of capital for the poor state of the public sphere (Habermas 2018).

92 This statement needs to be nuanced in that fringe platforms are not the only feature of the platformized public sphere that poorly fits the normative definition of the public sphere as defined by Habermas.

to the normativity of the concept, but that an idealized public sphere also excludes publics and opinions. Habermas defines and uses the concept normatively, that is prescriptively instead of descriptively. As a consequence, everything that is not in accordance with – or is not contributing to – this democratic ideal of the public sphere, falls outside its definition and theorization. Thus, actual phenomena that are present in the public sphere – like fringe platforms – but which are hard to explain through public sphere theory, can be dismissed as 'not part of the public sphere' (Wessler 2019, 6). This criticism is best formulated in feminist theory about the public sphere (Dean 2003; Fraser 1990; Landes 1988). Feminists have long scoffed at the presumption of inclusivity of the public sphere, since women were not admitted or their participation was not recognized as part of public life. They reject the normative idea of *leaving your identity behind*, not only because non-normative identities know this to be impossible, but also because of the importance of embodiment and experience in public debate. This embodiment is excluded from Habermas' public sphere in two manners, first because exclusion does not fit an ideal public sphere, and second because the emphasis on 'rational-critical discourse' diminishes identity and lived experience.[93]

If we accept the thesis that social media platforms constitute a significant part of our contemporary (online) public sphere, the Habermassian model – that expects an open and inclusive public sphere to bring forth rational-critical discourse – becomes problematic because social media platforms do not meet these criteria. Does this mean that the platformized public sphere is a *contradictio in terminis*? Not exclusively. Habermas' referral to the salons of eighteenth-century France was used to criticize the structural transformations that the public sphere went through in his own time under the influence of mass media, as well as capitalism. So, we can trace back the disappointment with the shortcoming of democratic organization and public discourse to adhere to a liberal public sphere long before the emergence of the online, the network, and the *social* media. Likewise, the feminist and postmodernist (Poster 2013) critiques that explain Habermas' public sphere as ignorant and exclusionary to the underprivileged apply equally to all earlier iterations. For marginalized groups, the liberal public sphere always was an imaginary that obscured their struggle. The Habermassian public sphere was always an idealization of how a democracy should work, and could thus, by definition, never materialize as a 'real' public space. This ideal is a referent to a presumed, as well as to an aspired, democratic organization, located in both the past and future, but never present. A bourgeois or liberal model of the public sphere did not become unfeasible because of changed economic and social conditions, nor was it the rise of social media platforms that ended the public sphere; rather, it never existed (Calhoun 1992).

93 A feminist critique that similarly scrutinizes the notion of a public sphere as normative and exclusionary, is that of the celebration of consensus and the intrinsic unipartite that is suggested through Habermas' bourgeois conceptualization of the public sphere (Fraser 1990). I will come back to this in the following sections.

Scholars have responded in various ways to the failings of the public sphere to live up to a utopian state, and to the inapplicability of the historical account of the 'bourgeois' public sphere. Some academics and authors such as Hannah Arendt, Seyla Benhabib, and Nancy Fraser have proposed different versions of the public sphere, while others (Dahlberg 2001) have suggested small alterations to the general understanding of the concept, so that it complies with the historical or contemporary reality of public discourse. And while some researchers still see the public sphere as a suitable normative framework to study public discourse and democratic participation online, (Zamith and Lewis 2014, 3) other scholars have scrutinized the Habermassian version of the concept[94], or even the idea of a public sphere itself, and want to do away with it. Political scientist Jodi Dean for example, concluded that applying the concept of the public sphere to the online is problematic, and should be abolished.[95]

I argue that the concept of the public sphere, or something similar, is necessary to emphasize the critical role of public spaces in a society where political (and cultural) deliberation among citizens takes place, and where public opinion, which fosters politics and policies, is publicly communicated (Castells 2008, 80). While wholeheartedly subscribing to the validity and relevance of the postmodern and feminist critiques of the public sphere, the notion of a space to perform publicness is still extremely valuable for media theory today (Boeder 2005). The terminology captures both material and immaterial spaces, evokes the performative nature of being (and performing) a public, and juxtaposes this to the actors that are 'non-public' which is an important perspective for this dissertation. The imagination and actualization of the public sphere depends simultaneously on the contemporary organization of political participation, media, and citizenry, and one could also argue vice versa.[96] Ignoring those fundamental characteristics of the public debate would hinder us in proposing advancements in democratic organization, and abolishment of the concept of the public sphere would incapacitate us to speak on those deliberative and democratic dynamics in the most useful terms available.

However, for the public sphere to remain a useful concept, it needs to be clear when the public sphere is a *descriptor* of our spaces of public deliberation and participation, or when the public sphere is a *normative indication* of an aspired rational-critical publicness. When the concept of the public sphere is used as an analytical concept to *describe* a (media) reality,

94 Media and communication scholar Christian Fuchs argues against any idealistic interpretation of the public sphere. He proposes a critical perspective on the commercialization of the internet as a public service and commons, as well as the colonization by social media of the 'lifeworld' (Fuchs 2015).

95 The well-chosen title of her article is 'Why the Net is not a Public Sphere ' (2003).

96 Earlier I alluded to Twitter bio's that contains references to the users' own imagination as an actor in public discourse, and thus to tweeting as political participation. Thus, the concept and practice of the public sphere not only depends on societal organization; societal organization might also depend on the imagination and performance of 'the public'.

it cannot assume an idealized version, and must be stripped of its most normative fractions. For instance, the rigid formulation of a hard boundary between state, market, and public cannot be maintained. In a platform society where the whole infrastructure is private and commercial, an idealized public sphere that is void of market influences is not useful as a descriptor. We can still analyze and criticize the blurred and opaque lines between market, state and public, in our sites of public deliberation for the common good, without using such norms as a checklist. For example, by stating that a public sphere can only exist if such boundaries are clear and impenetrable. Conversely, the idealized public sphere should be emphasized as just that, for example by calling it 'the Habermas idealized version of rational-critical discourse'. Its normative characteristics can still function as parameters by which we evaluate whether the quality of the public sphere, and the deliberation in it, is enabling or inhibiting the advancement of the 'public' (Dahlberg 2001).

4.2 Counter publics

In this research I use the concept of the platformized public sphere as a description of our online spaces of political communication and information, all the while rejecting the Habermassian idealization of it. Additionally, I step away from the idea of a public sphere as singular. What is called the 'public sphere' refers to the plurality of connected spaces where different publics engage in political participation, enacted through the medium of 'talk' in the broadest sense, encompassing all possibilities of communication and information exchange.[97] The consensus model on which the bourgeois conceptualization of the public sphere is built legitimizes the outcome of the deliberation, and therefore manufactures consent[98] about the outcome. However, an outcome is generally desired by the majority or a dominant minority, but not *the* public. The idea of consensus thus denies the contestation of the non-dominant against the dominant. Jodi Dean (2003) even argues that the singular term 'sphere', implies a wholeness of the public, and that this delineation of 'the public' or 'the people' as one further legitimizes the outcome of the deliberation. This unipartite of the term and concept itself thus obfuscates the strive that took place, and with it minority opinions and publics. This manufacturing of consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural is described by Stuart Hall (Hall 1977) as a characteristic of hegemony.[99]

97 Including but not limited to writing, talking, posting, liking, recording, sharing, retweeting, and hyperlinking.

98 This is a loose reference to *Manufacturing Consent* (2010) by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, and also to *Public Opinion* (1929) by Walter Lippman. The latter I will come back to in the conclusion of this dissertation.

99 Although we should take note that hegemony is a Gramscian concept, it was Stuart Hall who brought it into the field of cultural studies through his conjunctural analysis and its more elaborate understanding

Although I do not adhere to Jodi Dean's abolishment of the concept, I do subscribe to her assertion that contestation is an inherent characteristic of the public sphere, and that that characteristic is in contradiction with the suggestion of wholeness the term entails. This mirage of consensus obscures the presence of non-dominant positions and communities in a society (Dean 2003, 96), a critique I elaborate on in the next section. Contestation within and between publics is an intrinsic characteristic of the platformized public sphere, which is inhabited by dominant and counter publics. The choice for rebranding the concept as the 'platformized public sphere' does not solve the obscuring of contention through the suggestion of wholeness, and the marginalizing influence on fringe publics, as these are inherent to the imagination of 'a public'. However, neither would adding an 's' to the concept. What can be done, is keep reiterating that the singular notion of the public sphere excludes, neglects, and ignores some, by its definition, and effectively subverting any notion of unity or consensus a part of the research.

Participation and contention are, however, not always benevolent or left-wing, and it will not always abide by the ideas of rational-critical debate. The conflict and contention I celebrated as intrinsic to the public sphere looks grim when dealing with the alt-right. Fringe platforms have gained notoriety due to the toxic practices of their users, their role in disseminating radicalism and hate speech, and their connection to (far-right) terrorist attacks. In the next section, I explore what the implementation of contestation for the concept of the public sphere would mean, specifically in the context of free speech fringe platforms. Can these fringe platforms be considered what Chantal Mouffe calls 'agonistic pluralism'[100](Mouffe 1999), or do these illiberal forces fall outside the theory of deliberative democracy?

Within a hegemonic use of public sphere theory, there is no room for empirical disavowal or fringe opposition. Cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971) manufactures cohesion and unity within a group; thereby it controls minorities and minority opinion, through placing the interpretation of 'the other' within the desired interpretational frame (Lears 1985). Opposition and disunity are now interpreted through the frame that presupposes cohesion as ingroup, thereby making consensus a repressive tool. This is why seminal scholar Nancy Fraser (1990) introduced the idea of *subaltern*[101] *counter publics* to subvert the shackles of

of power relations. Hall's ideas are more suited to an analysis of the networked public of the public sphere.

100 This refers to the idea that agonism, which comes from the Greek word for 'struggle', is mobilized for the benefit of democracy, and that the 'other' is a necessity for democratic institutions and processes like the public sphere to function. This is in opposition to a consensus model, since even if 'debate' is mobilized, the outcome has to be general acceptance and agreement.

101 Subaltern is a term Gramsci uses in his theory on hegemony. It refers to people and communities that are low on a hierarchy, who are marginalized or oppressed and stripped of voices and agency.

consensus as inherent to the concept of the public sphere. Counter publics are conceptualized as the marginalized groups and their discursive spaces that enable articulations and interpretations of its members identities, interests, and needs in opposition to a dominant public (Fraser 1990, 66-67). In the parallel discursive arenas, these counter publics create their own salons, so to speak, and formulate and circulate counter discourses. These spaces are thus used for withdrawal and re-groupment while also functioning as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics (Fraser 1990, 68).

Habermas has taken some of these critiques to heart. In *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), he suggests two structural transformations to the concept of the public sphere; one is the inclusion of counterpublics in his theory, and the other is the assertion that the public sphere is not a monolith but a networked of diverse publics. Where the frame of consensus expresses the hegemonic qualities of the public sphere, a frame of contention accounts for the afflicted publics, such as the fringe communities. The contentious character of the radical free speech fringe does thus not necessarily place them outside of the theory of deliberative democracy.

My definition of fringe platforms,[102] as well as the descriptions of Gab in my first case study[103] gesture towards the concept of counter publics. Both the concept of the fringe and of counter publics emphasize the importance of space, community formation, and self-fashioning, and frame these characteristics within the specificity of the medium or technology that mobilizes the publics. For example, the notion of online publics that are discontent with the governance of the mainstream platforms, and migrate to new spaces, from where they contest the ruling norms of these mainstream platformized public spaces, complies with Fraser's description of counter publics as 'discursive arenas' and 'training grounds'. It is the antagonistic position towards a hegemonic force though that truly makes fringe platforms and fringe communities a seemingly easy fit with the concept of counter publics as found in Wessler and Fraser. However, any consideration of the radical free speech fringe as counter

102 I define fringe platforms as alternative platform services that were established as an explicit critique of the ideological premises and practices of mainstream platform services, that attempt to cause a shift in the norms of the platform ecology they contest by offering an ideologically different technology.

103 In my case studies I describe fringe platforms and Gab in a fashion that is strikingly similar to the description Wessler and Fraser give of counter publics. As we will see in Chapter 3, fringe platform Gab communicates its central ideology as a radical interpretation of the First Amendment, which protects the freedom of speech. And even though there is a disconnect between its positioning and its governing praxis, Gab's self-narrative of free speech is absolutely key to the fringe platform, because it stands in service of the deployment of its true core discourse, that of antagonism. By posturing as a free speech refuge for those exiled by Big Tech tyrants, as a beacon of online liberty, a counter position against the mainstream management of speech can be upheld.

publics has to take into account that they are problematic from a deliberative perspective. I will elaborate on their problematic nature and style in the next section.[104]

4.3 The style is the message

An important objection to demarking the radical free speech fringe publics as counter publics is the quality of their deliberation, and their overlap with alt-right publics. Rational-critical debate is at the core of Habermas' ideal of a public sphere. Online far-right audiences subvert the presumption of authentic political self-expression, through strategic, insincere, and deeply problematic deliberation that almost functions as a 'weaponized, automated affective public' (Karpf 2017, 202). In this manner, greater pluralism of publics might be a risk for a deliberative democracy rather than its savior (Downey and Fenton 2003).

These are, however, precisely the normative logics I want to bypass. As mentioned earlier, the power of dominant publics is legitimated through consensus. Consensus is especially hegemonic when it is not recognized as consensus, but rather as natural or logical. When dominant classes succeed in "framing all competing definitions within their range" (Hall 1977), a position within that specific (range of) ideology seems more an outcome than an ideological choice. The underlying values are perceived as outside of history and beyond particular interests, effectively making it what Barthes called a 'myth' (Hebdige 1991, 16). For that reason, feminist scholars reject the notion of rational-critical debate as a-historical and normative. Joan Landes argues that the requirement of rationality is a normative prescriptend for speech, which favors the dominant classes of society that determine what counts as 'rational' or 'critical'. So, if critical rationality ever existed historically, it was at the expense of silenced and invisible subordinated groups (Wessler 2019, 29).

Because ideology is (also) expressed syntactically and culture is in possession of semiotic value, the overturning and repossessing of symbols and meaning can challenge an ideology and, through it, the social order it reproduces. In order to demystify hegemony, coherence and integration must be fractured by displaying discontinuity (Hebdige 1991, 16-17). According to Dick Hebdige, (1991) this dissonance can be established through style. As a system of coded meaning, style reproduces the experience of both dominant and subordinate groups, becoming the raw material for culture and subculture. Through oblique expression, otherness, the spectacular, and noise, this system of representation can be disrupted and the order challenged (Hebdige 1991, 79-90). I argue that Hebdige's theory on style as a tool used by subcultures to deconstruct the naturalness of dominant cultures, is relevant to counter publics and fringe publics alike. For these publics, style is also a tool to break open the discursive plane. Counter and fringe publics are not just groups of subalterns with a reform program (Fraser 1990, 119); in their preferred form of self-expression, they

104 Some stress the disembodied and transnational traits as problematic to the concept but I argue that if they exist, online counter publics have these characteristics.

differ radically from dominant publics. Democratic participation should thus mean being able to speak in one's own voice, expressing one's (sub)culture through one's own words and style (Fraser 1990, 69), even when this includes uncivil forms of expressions, biased truth claims, and claims to moral rightness as such expression (Huspek 2007b; 2007a). Habermas acknowledges that public communication has a performative meaning, including tactics such as disobedience and uncivility; however, he maintains that deliberation in the publics sphere should remain on the basis of verifiable and debatable ideas and positions. I disagree with Habermas here, precisely because such normative conditions are tools of domination and subjectivation.

For alt-right publics, style is part of their self-fashioning as well as instrumental in their contention. Communities are able to combat cultural hegemony through the vernacular, which emerges when communication is observed as an alternative to the institutional (Howard 2008). The communication of the alt-right consists of memes, dog whistles, conspiracy, wordplay, in-jokes, layers of irony, and insults. They are expressive of a repertoire and a code that is employed to attract attention, avoid moderation, and fool mainstream social media and legacy media alike. The deliberation of the radical free speech fringe is also riddled with such speak, because their publics overlap with those of the alt-right. The broader fringe, however, is not always exemplary of the alt-right vernacular and code that disrupts and rejects rational critical deliberation. Some fringe communities use a disruptive vernacular that differs from the radical free speech fringe, while others do not use style to disrupt at all. However, all are fringe platforms defined by contention towards the mainstream. The point is that style, even the unconstructive, irrational, and offensive, is native both to counter publics and to fringe platforms.

4.4 Fringe publics ≠ Counter publics

The Gab platform and infrastructures conform to Fraser's idea of how counter publics function as spaces of withdrawal and re-groupment, as well as training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics (Fraser 1990, 68). Additionally, the discursive qualities and the ways in which fringe publics 'set themselves against wider publics' through "alternative discourse norms and practices" (Asen 2000), complies with counter publics theory. Fringe platforms force Big Tech to moderate more actively and more publicly, thereby acknowledging both the fringe's existence, as well as their own role as governing institutions. The normally so opaque infrastructure of the platformized public sphere, the invisible hand of the online public debate, has to reveal itself as actor for the sake of its legitimation (Wessler 2019, 135). In that manner, the fringe publics effectively bring conflict from the periphery to the center of the public sphere, and thereby exert influence on the mainstream, establishing alternative discursively connected public spheres (Warner 2002; Downey and Fenton 2003). 'Counter publics' is thus an incredibly useful term to describe and study the fringe.

While radical free speech fringe publics may be structurally similar to subaltern counter publics, this dissertation does not conceptualize radical free speech publics or platforms as counter publics, because the concept is construed around subaltern identity, which is absent from the radical free speech fringe. Fringe publics do voice a sense of oppression and marginalized identity, and certainly some might feel oppressed, but this does not mean that they can claim oppression. The far-right is well known for its victim mentality and exhibition of co-opted marginality – whereby a majority/dominant group claims that it is marginalized – (Emes and Chen 2022) as is displayed by chants and organizations such as 'white lives matters' or 'it's okay to be straight'. A Habermas norm I fully agree with is that for a group to be counted as a counter public the mere act of voicing moral feelings of indignation and contempt at perceived moral transgression is insufficient, for the legitimacy of the claim matters too (Wessler 2019, 150-151). Fascist and alt-right publics are not deliberatively beneficial or democratically legitimate (Wessler 2019, 150-151).[105] And even if members or whole fringe publics have marginalized identities – for example because they belong to a depleted working class – that position does not change the illegitimacy of the claim. Since what unites them as a group is their appeal to the right to victimize other marginal publics and express feelings of supremacy. Even in their disruptive moments, such fringe publics reinforce dominant oppressive ideas on race and gender. Any articulation that uses a repertoire as repressive as – for example – white supremacy in an affirming fashion, is not a (subaltern) counter public.[106]

For that reason, we should make explicit in our terminology that such publics are different from emancipatory publics and subaltern counter publics. Dropping the adjective 'subaltern' solves this linguistically, but might not do justice to those currently denominated as counter publics. Accordingly, I do not use the term counter publics for my case study Gab, or the rest of the radical free speech fringe, but stick to the terms 'fringe' and 'fringe platforms'.[107] However, the way in which I conceptualize fringe platforms is reminiscent of the counter publics terminology, characteristics, and function. This is a feature not a bug. Through the terminology of the fringe, I emphasize plurality, contentiousness, and power dynamics, while letting go of the normative framework of democratic legitimacy. A service

105 Nancy Fraser does suggest that counterpublics are not always virtuous but can also be explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian (Fraser 1990, 67).

106 Admittingly, corporations excluding publics and services from the online public sphere is extremely problematic from the perspective of democratic participation. However, valid critiques of the governance and ownership of the public sphere cannot be disconnected from the alternative democratic models these communities envision.

107 Although a name change delineates the different roles of fringe publics and subaltern publics in the public sphere, as well as their differences as democratic participatory actors, it does not solve the toxic presence of the radical free speech fringe an sich. Of course, we do not reserve theorization for non-toxic publics, but a hesitance with legitimizing the alt-right is warranted.

can be a fringe platform – signifying an opposition to Big Tech governance of the web – but this does not mean that the publics on the service constitute a marginalized people, nor does it suggest that the governance of the space is emancipatory or just. The exploration of fringe publics as counter publics is not necessarily to determine whether they are a positive influence on the public sphere – I would argue that they are not –, but rather to ask if they can be understood through the terminology of the public sphere. This dissertation thus considers all the fringe communities as participants in, and part of, the public sphere, also when these communities are not inherently democratic, productive or good.

5. To the case studies

A power dynamic has commenced between the privately owned mainstream social media, governments who want the tech companies to enforce regulation on hate speech and fake news, and a public that is divided between the wish for a less hateful online experience and the freedom to express and consume radical speech. Through the building of 'free speech' services, the part of the public that felt emancipated by the possibilities of the new media – but who are now again impaired in their freedom of expression –, contests the guardianship of the platform ecology by the mainstream social media. However, the contestation towards the powerful MsSM by a radical fringe signifies more than just a battle for domination over the public debate; they are a symptom of the transformation that our information and communication services have undergone since the emergence of social media platforms in general. Importantly, this transformation called platformization, also causes a renegotiation of the norms and values that govern the (online) spaces for deliberation and provision of information.

In this chapter I have set the stage for my three case studies. In these case studies I investigate the platformized public sphere through the study of fringe platforms. Fringe platforms are symptomatic of the ongoing platformization of our public sphere, and a technologically materialized contention to it. They are reactionary as well as anti-hegemonic, and – as a consequence –, conceptualize a public sphere as in flux and as a sphere of contending identities and politics, while also emphasizing the public sphere as a media, economics, and technology driven ecology. The terminology of 'fringe platforms' employs a spatial metaphor to evoke this center/periphery dynamic. A frame of platformization allows us to look beyond the boundaries of the platform, include partner services, infrastructures, business models, and ownership structures, and considers platform technologies as part of a socio-technological ecosystem. It is at these sites of conflict, where the dominant and normative forces of the platformized public sphere lose their sense of naturality and neutrality, that the ideological devices of a social media ecology become visible.

3 | Gab as a platform
Reassembling a fringe platform

1. The life (and death?) of Gab

Fringe service Gab.ai, now known as Gab.com, went online on 15 August 2016. Almost a year later, on 8 May 2017, it came out of its 'invite-only' beta mode and opened up for registration. Gab is a microblogging platform and social networking service, which allows users to share messages and interact with other people's content. Modelled after the social medium Twitter, and sharing parts of its design and affordances with the world's biggest discussion forum Reddit, Gab is predominantly used for the discussion of news, world events, and politics-related topics (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018, 7). This new social medium quickly acquired approximately 800,000 users at the end of 2018 and currently houses around 5 million 'gabbers' (Thiel and McCain 2022). If the number of registrations is seen as an indicator of success, Gab would be one of the most successful fringe platforms to have ever existed, although compared to mainstream platforms, the service is still tiny.[108]
The realization of Gab is largely attributed to its ideological counter-position, videlicet its criticism of censorship by the mainstream platforms. More specifically, it was Gab's public condemnation of Twitter's banning of prominent far-right figures who had violated the mainstream microblogging platform's hateful conduct policy (Hayden 2017) that established the service as a 'free speech platform'. The radical free speech platform communicated that it would be a "people and free speech first" ('Gab', 2016) alternative to Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook (Wilson 2016; Ehrenkranz 2017), and explicitly welcomed users banned or suspended from other social networks (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018, 1). Gab has thus construed and cultivated a counternarrative from the onset, which fits my description of a fringe platform like a glove.

In reality, the birth of Gab was just as much rooted in the resentment of its founder and CEO Andrew Torba[109], who was cast out of the Silicon Valley elite. When Torba's advertising

108 At the start of 2023, Facebook had an estimate of 3 billion active users and Twitter reported over 100 million active users.
See https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/ and https://transparency.twitter.com/en/reports/amars-in-the-eu.html.

109 Ekrem Buyukkaya and Utsav Sanduja, co-founders and former CTO and COO of Gab, both left the fringe platform in 2018 (Timberg et al. 2018). During their tenure, they were less visible as figureheads of the platform than CEO Andrew Torba.

technology company Kuhcoon, a system for running automated Facebook ad campaigns (Hess 2016), was picked up by YCombinator[110], he became part of their alumni network and consequently a Silicon Valley insider. That is, until he was thrown out because he harassed other alumni with anti-immigrant[111] and alt-right[112] rhetoric online (Wilson 2016; Dickson and Wilson 2018). Torba explained his dismissal as an impairment of his free speech, as well as the culmination of a growing dissatisfaction with Silicon Valley's liberalism (Ha 2016). According to Torba, he created Gab as a response to the same (perceived) left-wing bias of Big Tech (Hess 2016; Kantrowitz 2016; Ohlheiser 2016) that had caused his personal conflict. Whatever his genuine grievance against the big social media companies consisted of, rebelling against prevailing norms enabled Gab to position itself in the social media ecosystem. The platform foregrounds the conviction of radical free speech, in opposition to a censored and left-wing biased platformized media sphere. Consequently, Gab became the place of preference for people who wanted to express views that were not welcome in the mainstream, hence the moniker 'the platform for the deplatformed'. Providing a home for the 'censored publics' meant that those who migrated to this home included users who were banned elsewhere, due to hate speech, political extremism, and conspiracy theories.[113] Gab thus also attracted far-right or alt-right publics (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018; Neidig 2017), and was subsequently accused of being an alt-right platform.

When on 27 October 2018, a white supremacist and anti-Semite attacked the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh during the morning Shabbat, shooting seventeen people and killing eleven, police found that this domestic terrorist had a Gab account from where he

110 A Silicon Valley incubator.

111 Torba took a screenshot of a post from a Latino start-up founder which said "Tomorrow, being a Hispanic, Black, Muslim or woman in the USA is going to be very scary" (referring to Donald Trump's election as American president) and reposted it with the added caption "build the wall" (Tiku 2016).

112 *"All of you: fuck off. Take your morally superior, elitist, virtue signalling bullshit and shove it. I call it like I see it, and I helped meme a President into office, cucks."* (Tiku 2016). This quote not only shows language ('cuck') that is specific for the sexual nationalism and toxic masculinity of the alt-right, but also seems to imply Torba in the notorious start of the culture wars dubbed online as 'the great meme war'. Taken together, this quote shows that Torba speaks the alt-right vernacular quite well.

113 Some of the alt-right celebrities whose publics followed them to Gab are Milo Yiannopoulos who is known for defending and instigating misogyny, racism, and online violence like doxing and harassment (Andrews 2016; Aghazadeh et al. 2018), Richard Spencer who is the Web's most famous white supremacist (Hess 2016) and spiritual father of the term alt-right (Nagle 2017; Hartzell 2018; Hawley 2018), self-described 'free speech activist' Ricky Vaughn, Pax Dickinson who was forced to resign as Business Insider's CTO – and Twitter - over a series of misogynist tweets (Wilson 2016), reality show star turned Hitler admirer Tila Tequila (Ohlheiser 2016), the hipsterisch but violent far-right fraternity of the Proud Boys, congressional candidate and white supremacist Paul Nehlen, and of course conspiracy theorist Alex Jones.

openly disseminated anti-Semitism,[114] and explicitly heralded his assault[115] on the Jewish devotees as an act to protect white people[116] (Bagavathi et al. 2019; Hutchinson et al. 2018; Pagliery and Toropin 2018). Another white supremacist attack was possibly avoided when the FBI raided the house of Gab-users who were in contact with the Pittsburg killer, and the secret service found heavy weaponry at the site (Sommer 2018b; Weill 2019).[117] The terrorist attack put Gab as a platform in the public eye. Not only did the fringe platform attract "fascist and neo-Nazi groups that advocate violence" (Makuch 2019b; Murray 2018), Gab was also held accountable for its alleged radicalizing influence (The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), spreading disinformation, causing polarization, and possibly even enabling right-wing violence, as was supposedly the case in the Pittsburgh synagogue attack as well as the Charlottesville murder (Bagavathi et al. 2019). Both the event and the backlash changed Gab's history and, as I argue in this dissertation, were a precursor for many similar cases of controversial platform services coming under scrutiny for the societal impact of their publics, such as Parler[118] or Kiwifarms.[119] I elaborate on this backlash in Chapters 4 and 5.

In this chapter, I analyze how Gab functions as a fringe platform, and elaborate on how the concept of fringe platforms makes us understand services like Gab as relational, as contentious, and as a node in a larger ecosystem of services. As explained in the previous

114 Most notably, his Gab profile contained a bio that said that Jews are the children of Satan (Turkewitz and Roose 2018). He had posted the neo-Nazi code '1488' (Roose 2018). The number 1488 is a popular white supremacist symbol: it combines the number 88, which stands for 'Heil Hitler' since 'h' is the eighth letter of the alphabet, and the number 14 which refers to the 'fourteen words', a Christian neo-Nazi mantra that goes as following; 'We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children'.

115 Just prior to the shooting, he used his account to post "HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in."

116 The care for non-white people as shown by the Jewish organization HIAS triggers the antique antisemitic trope that Jews are 'passing as white' but ploy to subvert white identity. By diluting the whiteness of a nation through immigration, they achieve their goal of controlling white people, by destroying them from within. Some versions of this theory have Jewish people coincide or join with culture Bolsheviks or cultural Marxists. The current incarnation of this conspiracy is 'the great replacement theory', where people of color are seen as a Trojan horse meant to replace the 'original' inhabitants – referring to white people and not to actual indigenous people. Often the nation is portrayed as a body, blood, and soil, the immigrants as poison, and the Jews as collaborators and as an auto-immune disease.

117 Upon the discovery that the feds had infiltrated Gab, one of the suspects, who carried a frighteningly large amount of ammunition, committed suicide.

118 'Free speech' social media platform Parler came under scrutiny when the platform was used for the dissemination of the 'stop the steal' conspiracy that led to the January 6 attack on the United States Capitol (Otala et al. 2021).

119 The online hate forum Kiwi Farms, that was used for stalking, dox, and threat campaigns predominantly against transpeople and critics of the service, ostensibly with the aim to move their victims to commit suicide, was pulled offline in September 2022, after public pressure forced the hosting company to terminate its services (Hern 2022; Breland 2022).

paragraphs, how to characterize Gab is a bone of public and academic contention. I argue that perspectives that focus on Gab as an alt-right echo chamber, a Twitter alternative, or a public sphere, can be seen as partial. Gab poses as an alternative platform that provides an online space free from censorship. Through my analyses I argue that Gab has little success in creating a sphere for interaction, discourse, and political participation, and therefore does not succeed as an alternative social medium. Gab is also a technological object, owned by a company and therefore presumably run and governed as a business. This chapter argues that Gab also seems to be failing when understood as a company and platform technology. However, when Gab is viewed as part of the broader ecosystem of the platformized public sphere, functioning both as a refuge for the deplatformed publics and as a materialized rhetoric of contention against the governance of Big Tech, the answers to what Gab is, how it functions, and whether it is successful, change. Gab is thus best understood when viewed through its contentious relationship towards a mainstream, and not necessarily as a single platform, space for rational-critical debate, or business.

In Section 2, I elaborate on the analytical model underlying my analyses. As will be explained, in order to analyze Gab as a fringe platform in a public sphere, I have to make a few adaptations to this model. The rest of the section is devoted to my analysis of Gab. In Section 3, as the platform analysis has been performed, I conclude that the analytical model still needs another amendment to make it applicable to fringe platforms. Here, I incorporate an important characteristic of fringe platforms in my analyses, namely that of self-positioning and self-narrative. In the concluding section (Section 4), I show that the analysis still inadequately captures the fringe/mainstream dynamics, because the study of the platform ecology and platformized public sphere needs to concern itself with the platform ecosystem, while the model was created to analyze a single service. The model still holds many valuable perspectives and observations, but the overarching lens needs to be extended from *the platform as an ecosystem*, to *a platform ecosystem*. I therefore subordinate the analytical model to the perspective of the fringe lens. This means that I effectively keep many of the model's assertions about platform media and apply them to the new lens, but I do not use the model as an analytical mold for the analysis of a platform ecosystem. Thus, this first case study necessitated a change of lens in my research. The remaining two case studies of this dissertation are an execution of that shift. Through the determination of how Gab functions, and an investigation by proxy of how we should understand and study fringe platforms, I address the research questions of this dissertation namely: *What is the role of fringe social media platforms in a platformized public sphere? What hierarchies and shifts in power do they signify? And how can they inform us about the platform ecosystem?*

2. Six dimensions of Gab

A social media platform is not just a space where users do (radical) activity and create discourse. A platform is the product of several properties, comprising of – but not limited to – virtual space and physical technology; the owners that govern this space and the publics that inhabit it; its design and purpose; its business models and functionalities. Moreover, a platform is always related to a larger societal reality outside the – again either virtual or physical – walls of its platform ecosystem. Any analysis of a platform should be aware of that multifaceted character. As explained in the introduction of this dissertation, I view Gab as an open socio-technological ecosystem, consisting of networks of heterogeneous elements, discursive and non-discursive, where there is both human and non-human agency, and which is imbued with power relations, business models, and information flows. In the case of a fringe platform, I argue that any description of the platform should emphatically include its relation to the larger public sphere.

At the center of this third chapter is a platform analysis of Gab which analyses the service on several platform dimensions. I adopt the analytical model José van Dijck proposed in her 2013 book *The Culture of Connectivity*. This model combines insights from actor-network theory, which analyses the semiotic and technological relations between actors, with a political economy perspective, which balances the communicative practice of users with that of larger institutional actors as well as the political, economic, and legal dimensions of a platform. Rooted in the emerging field of platform studies, the key observation of Van Dijck's model is the understanding and analysis of a platform technology as an organizational structure. Van Dijck (2013) uses the terminology of 'the system' to describe social media services as socio-technological and political-economic entities within a broader network of socio-technological entities, together forming a socio-technological sphere. Van Dijck's understanding of social media platforms as constituting an "ecosystem of connective media" (van Dijck 2013, 21) is especially relevant to this dissertation since it calls for the analysis of the infrastructures of that ecosystem, in addition to the more customary analyses of social dimensions such as user practices. Such infrastructures can be technological, but also economical or legal.[120]

The analytical model proposed in *The Culture of Connectivity* – henceforward abbreviated to 'the CoC model' – enables us to analyze six platform dimensions: the socio-technical dimensions 'technology', 'content', and 'user/usage', and the political-economic dimensions 'ownership', 'governance', and 'business models'. The resulting Venn diagram expresses the

120 There are other models of platform analyses, most notably that of Jodi Dean (Dean 2003). However, none capture a platform as a 'socio-technical machine' as much as Van Dijck's model does. The emphasis on infrastructural elements is particularly suited to the deconstruction of a platform, independent of the specific platform, the types of services it offers, and the changing conditions of the platformized public sphere.

multidimensional character of a platform and frames the platform analyses as overlapping lenses (van Dijck 2013, 28). I have made three adjustments to the CoC model, for the sake of increasing the model's applicability to the study of fringe platforms. The first modification is to replace the dimension of 'user/usage' with that of 'publics'. In doing so, I frame both the platform and the user within democratic and public sphere theory. The emphasis on the individual usage of a technology is now replaced by an emphasis on public participation through media. Publics are defined as a social organization of those that share interests, values, or issues (Dewey 1954; Marres 2005). Furthermore, they are mediated through and extended by technology. On social media especially, publics are mobilized around topics, through the structure and affordances of the medium.[121] Thus, this dissertation sees publics as co-created by the medium. Networked publics specifically are both a space and a collective[122] (boyd 2010). The category of users does not hold these connotations of collectiveness or co-creation. In the case of Gab, we are looking at fringe publics that constitute themselves around grievances towards MsSM. The ideological position and power relation towards a dominant mainstream is the glue that holds this public together, which is different from a general connectivity between users as emphasized in the CoC model.

My second adjustment to the CoC model is that the analyses of the platform dimension 'governance' include Foucault's ideas about power and the political rationality underpinning the modes of governance (Lemke 2002). While the term moderation covers a praxis that is both active and aware, governance[123]– and with it the larger analytical frame of governmentality[124] – includes the less tangible ways in which a platform creates an environment for discourse. In the context of social media platforms, this means that not all governance has to come from a platform prescribing policy and enforcing the rules. A platform is also governed by instilling values and opening up possibilities that are internalized by its user base – what Foucault called *technologies of the self*. I subscribe to the definition of 'platform

121 For this reason, social media publics have been conceptualized as networked publics (boyd 2010), retweet cartels (Paßmann, Boeschoten, and Schäfer 2014), and topic communities (van Geenen et al. 2016; Wieringa et al. 2018).

122 "Networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (boyd 2010, 47).

123 The term 'governance' stands for 'the process of governing', which, of course, can refer to governments, but also covers non-state actors. The concept was first introduced by Foucault in his renowned lecture series at the College de France between 1978 and 1979. Foucault's lectures were pieced together from audio recordings and published two decades later (Foucault 2004; 2007).

124 The notion of 'governmentality' was already present in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (Barthes 1972) to denote an ideological mechanism that solidifies the social relation between the government and its citizens (Lemke 2007). I subscribe to the definition of governmentality as 'the logics, rationalities and techniques that render societies governable and enable government and other agencies to enact governance' (Burchell, Gordon, and Miller 1991; Kitchin, Coletta, and McArdle 2017).

governance' as the totality of how a platform influences and moderates user activity to concur to how the platform wants the service to be used (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018).[125] This assumes that Gab has a projected use, subject to an ideology, hardcode in the technology and procedures – or infrastructures – of the platform. Affordances, narrative, networks, and ideology, are all part of governance (Rhodes 2007). Another significant contribution to the CoC model with regard to governance is Gillespie's distinction between 'governance of' and 'governance by' platforms (Gillespie 2017). While the governance by platforms refers to the platforms themselves as governing institutions, the governance of platforms refers to higher institutions such as for instance national governments or the European Union as governing institutions. In the context of the governance of platforms, the terminology of VLOPs, or very large online platforms (Broughton Micova 2021), is important. This denomination pertains to digital platforms with over 100 million *Average Monthly Active Recipients of Service* (AMARS), at which point these platforms are subject to the Digital Services Act (DSA).[126] In this chapter, I focus on the governance by platforms, while in the next two chapters I also examine the governance of platforms, by other platforms. In Chapter 6, I address regulatory interventions of the state with regard to VLOPs.

This brings me to a final amendment. As already mentioned in the introduction chapter to this dissertation, due to the deplatformization of Gab, the analytical lens of this research moved towards a more infrastructural perspective, and from a platform as a stand-alone space for discourse to a space that is intrinsically connected and dependent on other services. This lens forces me to understand the *technology* of the platform as a hypernym consisting of the techno-cultural structures that users interact with (interface and affordances), as well as the larger infrastructures a platform is dependent on (backend, data centers, and hosting services). In this chapter, I do reproduce the platform dimension of 'technology' as laid out by the CoC model which only focusses on the technology the users interact with. In Chapters 4 and 5, however, I will abide by my final addition to the model, by including the technological infrastructures as part of the analyses.

My adapted analytical model for the analysis of a platform technology now includes six analytical dimensions: 'Ownership structures'; 'Business models'; 'Technology'; 'Governance'; 'Publics', and 'Content'. I discuss these platform dimensions in couples by virtue of the following categorization: 1) Gab as a company with business models and ownership structures; 2) Gab as a platform technology that actively shapes discourse through its affordances and

125 Whereas Light et al. (2018) sees the *vision* - the purposes, scenario's, and ideas of how the platform will and should be used – and *governance* – all that is done to fulfil the vision - as separate, I see governance as a superior category, encompassing the overlapping dimensions of vision, technology, ideological positioning, and moderation. That is to say that a platform's vision is part of its governance.

126 Proposal of the European Commission of 15 December 2020 for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act).

governance, and finally 3) Gab as a cultural sphere and medium where publics are active and consume and produce content. A general precursor is that the analyses on which this chapter is based pertain to the early stages of the platform, mostly between the summer of 2018 and the summer of 2019 before Gab decided to turn to the Mastodon infrastructure, which was transformative for all platform dimensions of Gab. This dissertation studies Gab as a 'moving object', a fringe socio-technical entity which is perpetually changing, and not as a fixed platform technology. The results of the analysis are a cross-section in time that will lead to the articulation of certain platform dynamics and characteristics.

2.1 Ownership and business models

Gab is not just a social media and counter-cultural phenomenon, it is also a company that provides a service to customers. Ownership structure and business models of a platform are "constitutive elements" and "mediators" of the culture on them (van Dijck 2013, 36&39). I unravel the political and economic dimensions of Gab by asking what kind of business Gab.ai.inc is, where it is located, who the owner is, and how it is made profitable. Answering these questions for Gab is surprisingly difficult because the fringe platform has shrouded itself in mystery, by being deliberately untransparent and often deceptive. Gab has stopped filling its annual reports to the U.S. Securities and Exchange commission since 2021 for example.[127] What is more, Gab's fringeness exuberates its elusiveness, partly because of its identity as a counter technology, but also due to the precarity that comes with operating at the fringes. Gab's lack of a physical location is a case in point. The company's address in Philadelphia, which is listed in Gab's official fillings, is actually a desk-share company and was only occupied by Gab.com for a month (Pagliery and Toropin 2018). In other words, Gab has no physical place that can be visited and/or studied. As will become clear in this section, Gab's ownership structure and business models are equally intangible and opaque.

Ownership structures

In September 2018, Gab.ai became Gab.com. As reported by Steemit[128][129], the domain name Gab.com was sold for almost a quarter of a million dollar on Flippa[130], a marketplace for buying and selling online businesses, and the buyer was revealed to be Gab.ai.[131] This means

127 https://www.sec.gov/cgi-bin/browse-edgar?action=getcompany&CIK=0001709244&owner=exclude&count=100.

128 https://steemit.com/informationwar/@froyoempire/gab-ai-the-free-speech-twitter-now-dot-com-and-making-more-advances-for-the-independent-internet.

129 Steemit is a fringe version of Reddit that focusses on equal distribution of monetary gains between the platform and content creators (users) by paying them in cryptocurrency per upvote.

130 The domain *GAB.COM* was previously sold for $200,002 on Sedo (Search Engine for Domain Offers) in 2014. https://namebio.com/gab.com.

131 https://www.thedomains.com/2018/09/22/gab-ai-upgrades-to-gab-com/#comments.

that Gab switched its (domain)name – as well as all subdomain names which include all user profiles and so forth –, and changed its URL or web address, and identification string. Such a transaction grants the company ownership. Ownership of the domain, however, does not render Gab independent of other companies. For one, every website needs a *domain registrar*, which, as the name suggests, manages the registration of the domain names. Additionally, domain registrars may also provide a domain name system (DNS) service, where it links the domain name to IP addresses so users can interact with the platform, as well as data storage and cloud services.[132]

Gab has sold off parts of their company to what they call stockholders[133] which could be interpreted as Gab 'going public'. John Dougherty and Michael Hayden of The Southern Poverty Law Centre and the blog *Hatewatch* went through Gab's fillings to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission – which is a required evaluation for a company that wants to make an investment – of 2018 and 2019, in order to find pieces of Gab's financial history and future. They discovered that Torba had filled two other public offerings both worth ten million dollars of Gab stock,[134] (Dougherty and Hayden 2019) using a provision of the 2012 law called the *Jumpstart Our Business Startups* (JOBS) Act[135]. This formal body of law allows start-ups to sell up to fifty million dollar worth of 'speculative securities' per year with far lower expense than a traditional Public Offering that can cost millions of dollars in legal, accounting, and marketing fees (Dougherty and Hayden 2019). Gab has thus created a liquidity of millions of dollars, with very little costs. Subsequent to 31 December 2018, the Company abandoned its planned Regulation A offering. [136] Gab planned an additional $10 million Security Token Offerings (STOs), as a Class B offering. Such an offering, of either blockchain based digital tokens or cryptocurrency, represents a share in the company, albeit with fewer voting rights (Bennett 2018). There is however no indication that Gab is actually

132 These essential services - platforms need regardless of the extension - can be described as 'hosting' services, stretching the term to encompass all that is required to 'provide a space' to a platform. Ever since the Tree of Life terrorist attack – and even before that - Gab has a very rocky history with companies that provide such services. I will elaborate on that in Chapters 4 and 5. For now, it is important to understand that Gab's software is what is analyzed as their space. However, this space is uncertain and unstable, since Gab is dependent on hosting companies which throughout this dissertation will reveal themselves as unreliable partners.

133 https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1709244/000110465920067852/annual_report.pdf page 7.

134 Since January 2018, StartEngine has prepared and published two security token offerings of ten million dollars - meaning that investors can buy cryptocurrency which go as shares or stock - each requesting permission to sell up to 2 million shares of Class B stock at 5 dollars. (Dougherty and Hayden 2019) According to Gab COO Utsav Sanduja, the tokens can be used as a "vehicle for investment purposes" (Bennett 2018).

135 https://www.sec.gov/spotlight/jobs-act.shtml.

136 https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1709244/000110465920067852/annual_report.pdf page 7.

publicly owned, as they are nowhere listed as such; they are not on Bloomberg nor are they registered at the stock exchange.

Business models

Langlois and Elmer (2013) state that social media platforms shape their communicative acts to economic logic. The most common primary business model of a mainstream social medium is revenue income from advertisements; Twitter and Facebook generate more than 90% of their revenue through advertising[137]. Gab, however, has described itself as an "ad-free social network"[138] and explicates no alternative ways of sustaining a business. How then does revenue flow in – and out – of the platform? While Gab is not a completely add free service anymore, it does not, in all probability, generate anything near enough revenue through advertising or data licensing. There are very few ads on the platform, apart from very small, obscure and fringe businesses. This is in all probability because major companies would not want to be associated with the radicalism Gab houses. Moreover, Gab only seems to offer advertising space, and does not have the data brokery to run personalized ads. The latter would require a complex and global ecosystem of data analytics, compiling of APIs and other technical resources, as well as developer guidelines and policies to coordinate and govern the interactions between platforms and complementors (Dal Bianco et al. 2014; van der Vlist 2022). There is no indication on the Gab platform or in its official communication and documents – such as its financial fillings –, that Gab has any of those components necessary for such a business model. Nor were there any hints of data brokers and/or analytics partnerships that could signify a technological or organizational embedding in a larger eco-systemic infrastructure, present in our data scrape[139] of the fringe platform. Consequentially, Gab probably does not have the capacity to use its data collection as a business model.

Another potential revenue model is based on users paying for services, most notably the vending paid premium subscriptions called 'GabPro'. A GabPro account offers extra services[140], enabling users to become professional content creators, to make money through Gab, for example by having a popular video channel, similarly to Twitch and Patreon (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018). However, according to Gab's SEC filing of December 2019, a mere 5,000 users of the – at that time – estimated 850,000 paid for premium services. In

137 https://www.statista.com/statistics/267031/facebooks-annual-revenue-by-segment/ and https://www.businessofapps.com/data/twitter-statistics/#:~:text=find%20out%20more.-,Twitter%20key%20statistics,users%20in%20the%20United%20States.

138 https://web.archive.org/web/20170901000155/https://gab.ai/ and https://archive.ph/R8SiZ.

139 The data scrape as performed by the Gab project.

140 For instance, options to invoice and crowdfund, larger video uploads, larger posts, verification of a user's identity, creating groups to become an admin, additional post management options including additional formatting and the scheduling of posts, and a removal of all promoted content in your Gab social feeds.

2019, a Gab subscription costs thirty dollar per six months or two hundred for five years (Dougherty and Hayden 2019). This suggests that Gab raised somewhere between 150,000 and one million dollars through GabPro. This is a considerable amount of money from the scope of Gab's overall budget, but it does not warrant a dependence on subscriptions as a sustainable business model. Especially because those who bought a GabPro subscription did not always get what was promised to them.[141]

The only other visible source of Gab's revenue, and what is suspected to be its primary source of income, is that of direct user support, that is crowdfunding efforts. By using the aforementioned JOBS Act, which allowed start-ups to raise money through crowdfunding, *Gab AI, Inc.* raised two million dollars (Dougherty and Hayden 2019). Through online crowdfunding broker StartEngine, Gab started its first crowdsourcing campaign in July 2017, and met its goal of one million dollar[142]only one month later, due to the contributions of about a thousand investors (Flynn 2017). The second million of investments was crowdfunded in 2018 from 1900 investors (Bennett 2018; Robertson 2017). Gab had a third (one) million crowdfunding round in September 2019 (Dougherty and Hayden 2019). As was the case with the stock offering, it is unclear whether the sponsors were correctly informed about the ways in which their money would be spent. When we take into account the scarcity of other sources of revenue and the fact that Gab reported a net loss of over 350,000 dollars in the first two years (Weill 2019; Moritz-Rabson 2019a), the fringe platform would likely have disappeared without crowdfunding.

Gab's financial past, present, and future seem highly uncertain. The absence of a clear economic model and an unorthodox reliance on direct user contributions make for a 'begging platform'. Examples can be found in the explicit and extensive pleas for money in Gab's official communication, either by asking for donations, or offering stock or cryptocurrency. The emphasis on economic incentives can also be seen in the general commercial character of the platform or in the foregrounding of economic functionalities and possibilities, such as selling Gab merchandise in its webstores, offering premium accounts and Gab Apps. Given the speed at which the previous crowdfunding rounds were successful, the company may continue to survive on the yearly injections of capital, from a relatively small number of investors (Dougherty and Hayden 2019). The wildcard in Gab's financial future is the

141 The central feature GabTV was only temporary active in early 2018, and was removed later that summer (Weill 2019) with its dedicated page on blank, yet was still advertised on its StartEngine crowdfunding page of January 2019 (Dougherty and Hayden 2019).

142 SEC crowdfunding regulations, more specifically the JOBS Act of 2012, allow certain startup companies to raise up to $1.07 million a year with minimal disclosure requirements.

aforementioned selling of the stocks. It could provide liquidity for Gab, yet there are already problems with admission of the stocks.[143][144]

There are two important deductions to be made of Gab as a begging platform. The first is that Gab generates a relationship with its users as supporters and customers. It encourages them to become professional content creators, – stimulating a prosumer audience – and frames the purchase of this privilege as the opportunity for users to become central figures in a free speech movement. Secondly, the platform's economic model is solidifying its fringe status. By wish or by necessity, Gab's ways of generating revenue seem to be progressively moving away from regular business models towards alternative cyber or fringe culture, focusing on bitcoins and unorthodox stock offerings. As said, these alternative tactics and models bring with them high levels of uncertainty.

2.2 Technology and governance

Zuckerberg once famously said that Facebook is not a media company that produces content, but a tech company that produces tools (Segreti 2016). Such a statement renders the active role that a social media platform has in shaping participation and discourse towards particular ends (Gillespie 2017) inconspicuous. This dissertation does not subscribe to such a passive image of a platform. I argue that platforms are governing institutions, through their technologies, infrastructures, moderating practices, and discourses. In this section, I use the term 'moderation' to refer to the conscious regulating practices such as the guidelines, terms of service (ToS), and other official communication on set regulations, as well as the enforcement of those rules. Additionally, platforms stimulate, afford, and prohibit, through their technological architecture that causes to arise a desired social use. In this section, I use the term affordance to describe "the actions that are suggested by an object or an environment" (Weltevrede and Borra 2016), which amounts to "what material artefacts such as media technologies allow people to do" (Bucher and Helmond 2018). Platform activity is thus shaped by an amalgamation of policy and technology, or 'moderation' and 'affordances'.

143 As it turns out, the stock cannot be actually sold until SEC qualifies the offerings and this approval has not yet been given, preventing Gab Inc from moving forward with the stock sale. One of the 'Regulation A offerings' has been pending for a year, raising serious questions whether it will ever be approved, not in the least because Gab has refrained from attaching their communications with the SEC regulators to their fillings, which is customary (Weill 2019). The inability of Gab to sell its stock left the fringe platform in a vulnerable financial position, since it had to wait until September 2019 before it could crowdfund another million dollars since those are restricted to once a year. However, Gab was allowed to accept 'commitments' to the purchase of their stock – cryptocurrency in Gab's case – and currently Gab has received 5.7 million dollar in commitments from 1868 potential investors (Dougherty and Hayden 2019), which seemingly provided a solution for the possible deficiency of capital the fringe platform was experiencing.

144 I have confirmed that all of these offerings were on the start engine website, but these pages have since been removed.

Both Gillespie (2010) and Latour (1990) have foregrounded a technological artefact's design as the carrier of politics and ideology, and the facilitator of behavior and social relations. The terminology of affordances encompasses platform functionalities, such as the like-button and the hashtags, but also the profile settings or the choice to be anonymous.[145] The concept emphasizes a broader relationality in a user/technology – or even a human/ecology – interaction. Through the terminology of technical affordances, one can describe the "complex interplay between users and platforms, humans and algorithms, and the social norms and regulatory structures of social media" (Crawford and Gillespie 2016, 411).

Affordances of Gab

The overall first impression of Gab is that of a normal social medium. As described in Gab's ToS[146], the fringe platform provides all the functionalities associated with modern 'Interactive Services', that will allow you to post, submit, join, follow, subscribe, and transmit, on pages such as chat rooms, message boards and fora, a feed, a profile, group pages, and discussion threads, among other things. However, upon closer investigation of the technological affordances, many of the smaller remarkable options and functionalities accumulate to a platform with certain ideological proclivities, namely, 1) a reaffirmation of the earlier discussed economic incentives and possibilities, 2) the emphasis on user agency with regards to security and privacy, and 3) a large amount of user control – and responsibility – over the content and discourse. Let me discuss all three inclinations. The first group of affordances are those that emphasize commercial activity, which can be reduced to company commodities (merchandise and other articles, donation button, Gab pro, and other Gab services). This affirms the already discussed frame of Gab as, simultaneously, a platform in need of money and as a platform where economic contribution is political resistance. I conclude that Gab's economic logics are, indeed, inscribed in its technology and are aligned with their fringe identity of being a counter technology.

The second ideological proclivity that expresses itself through Gab's affordances is that of user control. On Gab, the users are encouraged to regulate the visibility of their own profiles and content, but they also have elaborate options to filter their timeline, and thus control the exposure to other users' content. The affordances of Gab seem to incentivize its users to bear the responsibility for what they encounter, and what they spread, in the spaces they inhabit. Additionally, Gab affords elevated levels of privacy. Social media in general stimulate distribution and dissemination to dispersed audiences; however, Gab

145 In platform studies, such an engagement with the material properties of platforms as well as their interpretation and deployment by various types of users, is called *the device perspective* as introduced by Weltevrede and Borra (2016), which is primarily focused on analyzing the production of data within platforms.

146 https://gab.com/about/tos

does this without notable requirements to partake, such as registering (Jasser et al. 2021).[147] A combination of access to closed environments, control over exposure, and control over dissemination stimulates the formulation of small communities and bubbles on Gab. Anonymity as an affordance might lead to a lack of accountability, which potentially could lead to toxic behavior (Coleman 2014). The emphasis on user privacy thus congregates with the emphasis on user responsibility.

Moderating Gab

In the quest to create a safe and free environment for discourse, platforms impose and enforce certain rules, determining what is – and what is not – acceptable discourse, on their service, but also in a larger societal context (Gillespie 2017). Platforms therefore impose Terms of Use, which users have to agree with before entering the platform. Gab is no exception, despite their adagio of free speech. When signing up to Gab, users need to agree to their guidelines. The fringe platform started out with a small set of guidelines in 2016, and these guidelines have been altered and expanded upon in January 2017, and again in May 2019. Users subscribe to a 'Terms of Use', a 'Terms of Sale', a 'Privacy Policy', and the copyright rules as defined by the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA).[148] The guidelines that deal with moderation of speech, relating to this dissertation's larger framework of the platformized public sphere and online democratic participation, can be found in the 'Terms of Use' (TOU)[149], and subsists the guidelines for a user's personal and non-commercial[150] use.

Gab's TOU sets limitations on expression that can be divided in three clusters. The first cluster enforces a ban on any practice that attempts to get the platform to malfunction.

147 The encrypted chat messaging service called 'Gab Chat', for example, allows closed messaging apps, like WhatsApp and Signal, within the Gab environment. Messages in private room are encrypted on the user's device and will be deleted after 30 days.

148 The DMCA is an existing legal framework that Gab vouches to follow. This means removing content that infringes the copyright laws, and possibly moderate repeat infringers, if the owner of the infringed material makes a valid request. The Privacy Policy section details Gab's collection and disclosure of user data, which is more elaborate ever since moving to the new infrastructure, and arguably even more than their current vision documents - that champion user privacy - lead to suspect. The Terms of Sale bind the user to a payment of a premium subscription (GabPro) if they attempt to make money through Gab, for example by selling merchandise or subscriptions themselves, and additional regulations.

149 The current terms of use (TOU) is almost 5000 words long, which is significantly less extensive than most mainstream TOU. Twitter, for example, has a terms of service of 5700 words and this does not include the Twitter 'Rules and Guidelines' which is far more extensive than Gab's, and a Periscope terms of services which the Twitter user also has to agree to. This is noteworthy since non-compliance of Gab and Gabbers with the guidelines of partner services like Periscope causes those services to terminate their dealings with the fringe platform. I come back to this in Chapter 4.

150 For commercial use, the user receives the additional conditions of the 'Terms of sale'.

Users cannot attack or do damage to the platform, or interfere with other users' access to the website, including the spread of viruses or other malicious software. The second cluster focusses on the toxic behaviors that come specifically with online communication. Gab forbids spam like 'junk mail' and 'chain letters', but also the tagging of random users in posts, impersonation and the unauthorized access to other people's accounts, and the usage of bots or other automated devises such as spiders – even if the affordances allow for some bots. The third cluster impairs expression on the basis of offline limitations and possible consequences in the offline realm. Gab's TOU prohibit anything that is against the law of the United States of America[151] and 'is not protected by the First Amendment', anything that targets minors, and anything that results in physical harm or offline harassment – the latter shows a logic of a hard binary between the online and offline. The third cluster also shows the greatest disparity between Gab and other mainstream services.

Gab explicitly uses the legal framework of the United States as guideline to what speech is allowed on its platform. In doing so, Gab grounds itself in the American context, where other platforms tend to set up rules that go beyond national laws. Americentrism and national law systems in general are an uneasy fit with the transnational character of most platform technologies. What is more, unlike other platforms, Gab has chosen to solely focus on the legal framework of the United States as guideline to what speech is allowed, seemingly refusing to have a set of rules that go beyond the legal into the social. Gab's principle of moderating only illegal content is perhaps most apparent in the absence of stipulations against hate speech. Gab's 2016 TOU did not mention hate speech regulation at all.

The actual enforcement of these rules, however, is where Gab draws most criticism. The anecdotal experience of users on Gab is that of being regularly exposed to radical speech, some of it possibly in violation of the United States Hate speech laws. Similarly, it has been reported that content that should have the label 'Not Suitable For Work' (NSFW) is not tagged as such, and researchers (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018) found bot accounts spreading, possibly malicious, porn URLs.[152] Enforcing the TOU is important in many ways, not in the least to remove unwanted activity, but also to deter unwanted behavior. If the rules are not enforced, these guidelines lose some of its power. Additionally, if the enforcement of the rules is not consistent for all users, or just not consistent at all, the fairness and social contact on the platform is undermined. Arbitrary enforcement creates a service that reproduces inequality (Matamoros-Fernández 2017).

151 In May 2019, the platform added a section to the community guidelines that specifies that the rules on Gab that are based on these national laws, also apply to international users ('Community Guidelines', n.d.) (Blekkenhorst 2019).

152 The section 'Public and Content' further confirms the presence of radical and forbidden content. These are examples of bad moderation and a lack of enforcement of the rules.

There are huge doubts as to whether Gab is actually practicing moderation, instead of just prescribing it. Gab does, in fact, moderate. Utsav Sanduja has admitted that Gab banned a user for threatening to kill Donald Trump, another for spreading revenge porn, and some for spreading spam and malicious malware (Ehrenkranz 2017), as well as repeatedly helping law enforcement to gain information on users, going as far as proactively reporting them to police (Pagliery and Toropin 2018). Gab's interference in hate speech is best visible through the well-documented controversies of Gab deplatforming prominent members within radical communities. Most of the banned individuals made outlandish threats, for example that terrorists should seek out left-wing activists instead of random Muslims, as a response to 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings[153], or advocating for rape, torture and murder of Jews[154] (Hess 2016; Hayden 2017).

What these examples of enforcement have in common is that the moderation only takes place if certain content or activity is at the root of a controversy. This can be offline violence linked to Gab, but also a controversy as 'small' as a mainstream outlet reporting on the violent content or toxic discourses that are present on Gab. Especially if the controversy has the potential to have negative consequences for Gab, such as conflicts with their partner services[155], the fringe platform takes a more active role as governing actor. Moderating practices that are based on, or explained by, either community unrest or public outrage, instead of unacceptable behavior or ideological underpinnings, is a transferal of responsibility as was the case with the affordances. When stricken with controversy, Gab is sometimes forced to moderate, and does so begrudgingly. Subsequently, it often dodges accountability with conflicting and insincere communication. This does not answer to our standards[156]of what moderation should be, which is a problem if Gab is to function as a sphere for discourse. Because, the governance *by* platforms is probably of greater importance for the discursive sphere on the platform – and by extension for the larger platform ecology – than the legal restrictions under which platforms themselves are obliged to function (Gillespie 2017).

Gab has been open and fairly consistent in sticking to this axiom of free speech interpreted as 'minimal oversight', leaving the moderation of hate speech to its publics. Torba

153 Remark made by 'the crying nazi' known as the central figure in the Vice documentary of the 'unite the right' rally. He claimed that this was just a hypothetical '*either-or* scenario', nevertheless Gab banned him in march 2019 (Moritz-Rabson 2019b).

154 Gab initially only erased his bio. After more anti-Semite remarks about Jewish world domination conspiracies in which Jewish people, as a centralized organization or shadow government, control either the world or the internet, or both, and calls for the eradication of Jews, racist remarks, and references to Timothy McVeigh, the troll was banned from Gab. This banishment kicked off a censorship debate on the fringe platform among his (large) following on the site.

155 I will come back to this overarching pressure from the platformized public sphere in Chapter 4.

156 Platforms should "take up guardianship of the unresolvable tensions of public discourse, hand back with care the agency for addressing those tensions to users, and responsibly support that process with the necessary tools, data, and insights" (Gillespie 2018, 216).

has explained that "we want everyone to feel safe on Gab, but we're not going to police what is hate speech and what isn't" (Ellis 2016). This last statement separates Gab from mainstream social media who had just, in 2016, started to address the issue of hate speech seriously in the wake of governments complaints. Gab's customary refusal to moderate is one of the reasons it is viewed as an alt-right bastion that safeguards extremism and toxicity (Ehrenkranz 2017; Roose 2018). Gab's Terms of Use rules and regulations make reasonably clear distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable speech, however unorthodox and dogmatic they might be. Basically, all that is legal under the first amendment is allowed. However, Gab's enforcement of the rules and its communication about this enforcement is insincere, opaque, inconsistent, controversy driven and thus not value based.[157] The governance praxis of Gab, as well as the justification of its governance, are based on the communities it houses instead of what it would take to garnish a public.

Platforms are generally opaque, inconsistent, and reactionary when they govern; reluctant to clarify their choices, hiding the true scope of – or reason for – moderation. Platforms hardly abide by their own TOU, but rather use them as justification when it suits them (Gillespie 2018). Gab – a platform with a toxic user experience due to lack of moderation – uses its ideology of free speech to justify its moderation strategy. It withdraws central moderation and employs users through its affordances, to moderate hateful conduct. Combine this unwillingness to moderate with a platform architecture that affords closed environments, bots, and other notable affordances, with a call to arms aimed at deplatformed publics, and it is not difficult to imagine why Gab is so toxic.[158] As we will see in the next section, the sphere of discourse that Gab creates is not a sufficient justification for their governing practice, and the technological affordances have proven inadequate in nudging the publics to produce constructive discourse. The exclamation of Gab's moderation practices – or lack off –, functions as the pillar under its ideological positioning as a fringe platform, however this means that, generally, moderation subverts Gab's self-narrative. Therefore, the efforts necessary for creating a sphere for discourse on Gab, are undermined by its fringe self-positioning.

2.3 Publics and content

After the Tree of Life terrorist attack, journalists and academics pointed to a long history of Gab users and groups condoning and celebrating[159] terrorism and political or identarian

157 All these critiques are resonating with those on the governance of the mainstream social media platforms; however, the severity of toxicity on Gab is higher.

158 For example, Zannettou, Bradlyn et al suggest (2018) that the chats could indicate efforts to recruit millennials to the alt-right community. This might be contrary to Gab's envisioned user, but the technological affordances still afford such behavior, making it part of its governance.

159 Many Gab users were celebrating immediately after the Tree of Life synagogue (Katz 2018).

violence (DeJesus 2018), including ethno-nationalist conspiracies that claimed all kinds of governmental bodies and other powerful institutions to be under the control of 'the Jews' or 'the left' (Weich 2019). Gab was implicated as a recruitment tool by several neo-Nazi, accelerationist, and alt-right groups (Pagliery and Toropin 2018). This qualitative empirical view was complemented with distant quantitative analyses, predominantly focused on Gab's publics and the content they shared. These data-analyses confirmed that Gab was disproportionally used for the spread of political, extremist, and toxic content, and thus seem to justify the typification of Gab as an alt-right bastion. The publics that Gab houses were increasingly viewed as revealing of the ideology of the fringe platform itself and, in proxy, of its owners.

In this section, I summarize and elaborate on the qualitative and quantitative analyses of Gab's content, public, and general platform activity. I complement those results and compare them to the data analyses that were performed on data of the Gab project. The accumulation of empirical and hermeneutic results will be interpreted through the analytical model of this chapter. Generally, the results show that the content on, and publics of, Gab are radical, political, and far-right. Three conclusions can be drawn with regard to Gab; 1) it does, indeed, seem to be an alt-right echo chamber[160], 2) it is, indeed, is a platform for the deplatformed, and 3) Gab's reporting on user numbers is untransparent, yet unveiling of its fringe identity.

Publics

When Gab opened registration in 2017, it supposedly had a waiting list of over 100,000 applicants. In early interviews, Torba stated that Gab initially welcomed almost 60,000 users a week (Ohlheiser 2016), amassing a user base of over 430,000 people rather quickly (Bennett 2018). Over the years, the numbers Gab released pointed to a steady increase of users, accumulating to 850,000 in December 2018 (Weill 2019). While the latest estimates vary between mere tens of thousands of users (McIlroy-Young and Anderson 2019) and two million (Gilbert 2019), the general idea is that the fringe platform is surging. This, however, does not correspond to the general impression that the users[161] have of the platform, as empty and quiet, with many bots and bugs (Roose 2017; Dougherty and Hayden 2019). There are two major explanations for these discrepancies, and both can be attributed

160 I do not necessarily subscribe to the metaphor of the *echo chamber*, because I have great doubts whether the term describes something that is empirically valid. However, Gab is described often as such, denoting that the publics on Gab are predominantly and rather exclusively alt-right.

161 What is painful to Gab is that this image or critique of Gab as a failed platform, contrary to that of Gab as an alt-right service, often comes from its own users and former allies. A famous online neo-Nazi and early supporter of Gab called 'Weev' has decried Gab's pleas for money, its functionality, and its moderation policy, writing that Gab is "just a bad Twitter knockoff with a really bad UI that for some reason you have to pay for". See https://archive.ph/StWoB.

to Gab's character as radical free speech fringe. Either the numbers Gab communicates are deceptive, or users do sign up on the platform, but often leave soon, so there are many user profiles, but few active users. Quantitative analyses (Thiel and McCain 2022), including those performed as part of the Gab project,[162] confirm that the discrepancy between the reported user numbers and observed active profiles can be explained by the large number of users who leave after a short stint. However, this is complemented by Gab further exaggerating those numbers, or at least deliberately ignoring the large number of inactive users. It is likely that this is due to Gab's wish to come across as a legitimate alternative to the mainstream, with a stable userbase.

Analyses show that Gab's publics are homogenous[163], overly hateful (Mathew et al. 2018) and extremist[164], and that these toxic users are shown to be very active and influential in the Gab ecosystem (Lima et al. 2018). Generally, the discourse on Gab is largely driven by a core of elite 'super-participants'[165] (Graham and Wright 2014, 201) who shape the far-right discourse (Zhou et al. 2019). Although the existence of platform elites is unsurprising, the extent of their power in the attention economy on Gab is significantly greater when compared to such super-participants on other platforms like Twitter. Analyses also found numerous accounts that try to disrupt and deceive, such as bots and troll-accounts, that were inspired by, or have migrated from, 4chan (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018). Migration between services is a major determinant of Gab's publics. It is called a platform for the deplatformed for a reason. Many of their publics followed prominent far-right figures who violated the mainstream social media's hateful conduct policies, and ended up at Gab (Hayden 2017). Research confirms (Thiel and McCain 2022) that after every controversy – predominantly in an American context – users move to Gab and the activity on the fringe platform intensifies. When Twitter conducted a so-called 'purge' of alt-right accounts in 2016, Gab claimed it gained tens of thousands of users in a short time. After Parler was taken down due to the January 6 insurrection, Gab gained 10,000 users every hour for a

162 Through a data scrape of March 2019, we confirmed 738,487 profiles. Subsequent analyses on samples showed that about 10% stayed active.

163 Analyses show a great homogeneity of Gab's publics. The majority of Gab users are conservative, male, and Caucasian (Lima et al. 2018), English speaking and part of an English and American community (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018; Zhou et al. 2019).

164 Lima et al (2018) found that almost thirty-eight percent of the users on Gab that were listed as extremists have posts categorized as 'News' and that the top 10 news spreaders can reach more than eleven percent of the Gab users. Among the top 10 most followed (verified) accounts on Gab in August 2017, four were extremist users according to the ADL and SPLC, and 35% of Gab users follow at least one of the 29 extremist celebrities as listed by the ADL and SPLC. Additionally, people listed by the ADL (61.11%) have a Gab account (Lima et al. 2018).

165 Those with symbolic, social, or actual capital on the forum. Such capital is achieved through producing activity that draws a lot of interaction, either by posting in high frequency, having a large audience, or otherwise by an opinion leader.

weekend (Brandt and Dean 2021). More concerningly, Gab even seems to attract platform activity when implicated in offline violence (Coaston 2018; Rogers 2020).

The analyses of the Gab project (Blekkenhorst et al. 2019) confirmed that deplatforming causes temporary migration and a temporary spike in activity on fringe platforms. There was both a steady growth of the platform, and an additional spur in subscriptions after the aforementioned 'events'. For example, when in August 2018, Twitter suspended Alex Jones for a short period, and when in September 2018 this ban became permanent, the number of unique active users tripled, in comparison to the preceding months. This was also true for the general activity, which also spiked after deplatforming events. Importantly, after these events, spike activity dies down again quite quickly, and only a small group of the newly acquired users stays active. Subsequently, a corpus of around 30,000 Gab-users that had received a ban by Twitter was analyzed on how long these users remained active on Gab before they went away, assumingly back to the mainstream.[166] Results showed that a third of the deplatformed public was only active on Gab for three days or less, which roughly corresponds to most Twitter bans for minor violations. Two-thirds of the corpus became inactive within six months after registering to Gab. About ten percent of the banned publics stayed active on Gab indefinitely and now belong to the Gab 'permanent' public (Blekkenhorst et al. 2019).

Content

Analyses show Gab to be a broadcasting medium – aimed at dissemination rather than consumption – that is very politically oriented[167], whose politics are disproportionally right wing[168], conservative, and radical, and that the shared content is significantly more often toxic than on MsSM (Lima et al. 2018; Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018; Mathew et al. 2018; Zhou et al. 2019). Gabbers[169] predominantly use the platform for the dissemination and

166 A more nuanced analysis investigated which users were the 'deplatformed publics'. In order to select a corpus, Blekkenhorst et al. (2019) queried the user accounts that mentioned Twitter and any of the words 'ban' or 'suspend' within the first 24 hours of their activity on Gab. In this way they selected the users who joined Gab because of moderation policies on Twitter, and therefore complained about this in their first contributions. A qualitative investigation confirmed this, since they saw little false positives; of course, the amount of false negatives is unknown. Subsequently, they quantified how long the almost 30,000 users remained active on the platform after their first post.

167 Posts that are tagged as a category are predominantly tagged as 'News' (35.74%), followed by 'Politics', confirming the focus on politics on Gab. The other categories are leisure and/or culture such as 'Humour', 'Entertainment', 'Music', 'Technology', 'Art', 'Sports', 'Faith', 'Philosophy', 'Photography', 'Science', 'Finance', and 'Cuisine'. (Lima et al. 2018) – in some instances researches even found examples of political campaigning (Woolley, Pakzad, and Monaco 2019) –.

168 Even when there are more unique left-leaning news domains than right-wing news domains, the right-wing domains are much bigger and share a larger portion of the content (Lima et al. 2018).

169 Users on Gab.

discussion of news and world events, instead of conversation and social interaction (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018; Zhou et al. 2019). More than the users of mainstream social media, the publics on Gab share external content such as news articles, often in the form of links.[170](Lima et al. 2018; Zhou et al. 2019; Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018) A very large portion[171] of the shared domains on Gab are websites that deal in news, and most of these URLs lead to news sites with a far-right signature (Zhou et al. 2019). In addition to this, research into the diffusion dynamics on Gab shows that content of hateful users, who exhibit a strong degree of proactivity, cohesion, and homophily[172], diffuse farther, wider, and faster[173] than content of non-hateful users. The distribution of (far) right political content on Gab is thus very prevalent.

Gab has an imbalanced distribution of social capital and very low levels of reciprocity (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018), betraying extreme social hierarchy and elitism (Zhou et al. 2019), marking Gab as a 'feudal' platform.[174] While most social networks pose stark inequalities, with a small number of users wielding a disproportionately large amount of influence, on Gab even fewer users and sources command an even larger amount of the attention (Zhou et al. 2019). The aforementioned shared links (Lima et al. 2018; Zhou et al. 2019; Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018) are disproportionally distributed in a few (top) domains – meaning that a small number of domains accumulate a disproportionate amount of shares. As for the publics, where most Gab users do not post messages regularly – or none at all –, a very small percentage of 'Gabbers' have a high volume of posts, and large numbers of followers (Zhou et al. 2019). As described above, on Gab, these are almost always alt-right influencers.

Analyses of Gab content show an abundance of toxicity (Lima et al. 2018; Mathew et al. 2018). In comparison to mainstream platforms, Gab hosts elevated quantities of hate speech, exceeding the hateful content on mainstream social media like Twitter (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018), significant amounts of conspiracy content, and possibly even state-sponsored messaging of Russian sources (Zhou et al. 2019). Hateful posts diffuse deeper into the Gab network and go more viral (Mathew et al. 2018). Gab is also very prone to the dissemination of fake news usually reinforcing right-leaning beliefs (Lima et al. 2018). Similarly, structuring functions such as 'Categories', 'Topics', (most shared) hashtags, and retweets show a

170 36 percent of Gab messages contained links (Zhou et al. 2019).

171 74 percent (Zhou et al. 2019)

172 This observation is based on their fast repost rate and the high proportion of early propagators (Mathew et al. 2018).

173 Hateful users are also more influential due to the significantly large values of structural virality, average depth, and depth. In addition to this, they also show early adopter strategies. (Mathew et al. 2018)

174 The distribution of reposts on social networks such as Gab and Twitter is known to approximate a power law distribution. In practice, this means that a very small number of messages receives the vast majority of reposts (or retweets), whereas most messages get very little attention (Zhou et al. 2019).

strong presence of right-wing politics and news, (racial) identitarianism, and conspiracies, for example '#Pizzagate' (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018). This is equally true for channels with the most followers, which, on Gab, seem to be a controversial bouquet of alt-right influencers or celebrities (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018); on Twitter, these influencers would be mostly popstars and athletes (Zhou et al. 2019). Notably lacking are influential users that function as contra points to the alt-right, thus ensuring a narrow scope of deliberation, with few oppositional views detected (Zhou et al. 2019), as well as an indication of Gab's heavily right-skewed user base (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018), validating the image of Gab as an alt-right echo chamber (Lima et al. 2018).

The analyses of the Gab project (Salazar and de Winkel 2019) confirm the findings on user participation and hate speech, and show at least twice as much hateful posts on Gab in comparison to mainstream places. However, Salazar and de Winkel (2019) do nuance this image of Gab a little bit by writing a proverbial *null hypothesis*,[175] and asked "can people be non-radical on a radical platform?". These analyses[176] that focus on the existence and prevalence of non-right-wing publics, non-extremist content and non-political discourse on Gab show; 1) that non-radical and non-political discourse exists on Gab, and 2) that Gab is too small, too inactive, too controversial, and too political to be considered a sphere of (non-political) social interaction and the forming of interpersonal relationships.

175 A null hypothesis is a hypothesis used in statistical research that states that the difference that is found is on the basis of chance alone. I use this figure of speech here to emphasize that we turned the usual question of 'is there political radicalism on Gab' on its head, and asked whether there were non-radical people on Gab. The use of this figure of speech is to show how a question, to a large degree, determines its answer.

176 Our web scraping provided us with 1631 groups, of which we discarded 1310 because they had 100 or fewer posts and were therefore not considered as contributing to public debate due to low activity. This left us with 321 groups - and 810, 570 posts - which we qualitatively categorized in six distinct categories depending on the title and a visit in the group: 'topical'; 'political'; 'identity driven'; 'nationality'; 'forum-communication'; 'miscellaneous' that covered all groups. The biggest category of groups is 'topical', with 155 different groups that are focused on one topic such pets, comics, cannabis, humor, or computer technology. The second largest category consists of the (explicitly) political groups of which there are 87. There are 35 identity-driven groups for example 'Manly men of Gab' or 'traditional Lifestyle' or 'Christianity'; 24 groups that focus on nationality of the users, and 17 groups that focus on forum communication ('Introduce yourself', 'breaking news', or 'Gab on Android'). The sixth and last category consists of only 3 groups that are categorized as *miscellaneous* because they are uncategorizable due to their absurdist nature 'the world throat punch tour' and 'tentacle death rape'. On this corpus, we performed a series of – partly – computational analyses: we quantified the number of active users, visualized what groups shared active members, and calculated the distribution of hate speech. Subsequently, we conducted a qualitative investigation of the groups in the context of the computer-generated findings.

3. Gab as a fringe platform

So, what is Gab? An ecosystem for discourse, a platform technology, a fringe service? Considering the analyses above, it is hard to uphold the concept of Gab as a counter public (sphere) or a Twitter alternative, even if you discard all normative requirements of the public sphere. The activity on the platform is too low to formulate positions or counternarratives, and the absence of community makes it impossible to speak of a public. It seems plausible to dismiss Gab as a marginalized online space for an alt-right public or as a failed technology. Both characterizations are general critiques of Gab, often used to discredit the service, and come from journalists, users, tech people, political actors, and academics who denounce all that Gab stands for. In this section, I examine both typecasts of Gab, before arguing why the concept of the fringe platform can be used to explain Gab's (lack of) functioning.

3.1 Gab as an alt-right echo chamber, or a failed technology?

Analyses regarding the content and publics on Gab have painted the picture of an alt-right platform. It contains large amounts of hateful content and political extremism, including white supremacy, Nazism, and the celebration of such violence, catering to the conclusion that it provides a platform to the most extreme hate groups, for leaders and extremists who have been purged from major social media platforms. The governance of Gab is worrisome. While its affordances and public communication attract, foster, and facilitate toxic and far-right publics, as well as hateful and illegal activity and content, its moderation is absent and inconsistent, opaque, and deceitful. Gab actively curates far-right discourse, and furthermore, the extremism on Gab cannot just be attributed to the publics, since the free speech platform itself has actively expressed xenophobia, specifically anti-Semitic ideas, on several occasions (Pagliery and Toropin 2018), which – in rather characteristic fashion – is then covered up through deception.[177] Like many modern alt-right figures, Torba is always present where the far-right are, speaks at their events and lets them speak on his platform, but when confronted, he gaslights or attacks. To call Gab an alt-right technology or an echo chamber of the far-right is defensible.[178]

177 Torba first denied the incidents attributing them to some conspiracy against him, questioning the authenticity of the posts and suggesting they might be doctored images (Timberg et al. 2018). He then changed his narrative, first by saying that the posts were satire to get 'people discussing the importance of free expression for satire, comedy, political discourse, and legitimate criticism', and then describing the remarks as 'a few edgy tweets posted by interns,' (Timberg et al. 2018). Eventually, he deleted the tweets altogether (Pagliery and Toropin 2018).

178 It is important to note, though, that Gab is different from Stormfront, since it is not a platform by Nazis for Nazis. Extremists have been banned and white supremacist terrorism has been denounced, although probably more reluctantly than a mainstream service would have been comfortable with. Gab did allow for non-radical activity and left-wing politics - even if they are an underwhelming presence on the fringe platform –, and has taken scarce action in order to diversify its publics and discourses.

Gab can also be considered a failed technology if the success of a social media platform is measured on its potential for garnishing an ecosystem where publics enact in discourse and political participation. Gab has positioned itself in such a manner. It declared itself a free speech alternative to the mainstream, said that it would bestow this freedom on a variety of political identities and not solely on the alt-right, and advertised itself as a community. However, Gab fails as an environment for discourse, and seems largely uninterested and uninvolved in fostering such a space. The platform is toxic and highly hierarchical, with low participation and little communication. We tend to see more user than public, more broadcasting than discourse, more opportunism than community, none of which resembles vibrant democratic participation and deliberation. If Gab is an 'echo chamber', it is because echoes travel easily through empty spaces. Since Gab can hardly be described as a community and does not substantiate conversation, the website also fails as a service and technology. Gab is buggy and confusing, much of the activity on the site appears to come from a small core of frequent users, and several of the well-known figures who once posted on the site have abandoned it (Roose 2017). Generally, fringe platforms have had trouble achieving scalability (Weill 2019). Gab either has a deficiency in resources or willingness to take responsibility for the activity on the platform. The absence of a viable business model makes it hard for Gab to survive as a platform and a company Gab hardly functions.

And yet, to conclude that Gab is a failure should be determined by what its goals are. If it is to foster community, I dare say it has failed. If it intended to be a social medium like other social media, whether become profitable through revenue or create a global village, it failed. If its aim was to be a platform technology, well, it is one, but an abhorrent one. Torba likes to position Gab as a rival or free speech alternative to Twitter[179], but that is in name only. However, I would argue that as a fringe platform it has succeeded. The more interesting and explanatory part of this phenomenon lies not in its manifestation as a (single)platform or microsystem, *but in its relational dynamics with a larger platform ecosystem*. A fringe platform explicitly contests the governance and ideology of the mainstream web and provides an alternative to that normativity, thereby aiming to influence and move the ideological premises of the (social media) platform ecology. The perspective of a fringe platform can explain all other platform dimensions and characteristics. For example, Gab does not form a community, except for the short moments when the platform attracts deplatformed publics, right before they go back to the mainstream. This is telling for what a fringe platform really is, namely as something between a port of refuge and rallying point (Hayden 2018).

So, while both negative characterizations of Gab may be correct, such an argument ignores the most interesting characteristics of Gab, namely its contentious nature and its relationship towards the mainstream and larger platformized public sphere. Gab reveals

179 I am referring to pre-Musk Twitter here, since I do not know how the new ownership will affect Twitter and Twitter comparisons.

itself as inherently relational – or even parasitic –, instead of as an independent social media alternative. Therefore, Gab should not just be studied as an ecosystem for discourse, but as a fringe social media service. Additionally, we have learned from Dick Hebdige and Nancy Fraser in the previous chapter, that the resistance of counter publics and counterculture is also discursive and must be understood through symbols and style. The fringe itself is a materialized counter narrative, presenting an alternative idea (and service); it cannot be understood without its self-positioning towards a mainstream. The center/periphery dynamic – which is the essence of a fringe platform – is left invisible because we have only studied Gab as a single platform (microsystem) without analyzing these dynamics as part of a larger ecosystem. Thus, we need to further adjust van Dijck's connectivity model and open it up to a seventh dimension: that of the self-identification or 'positioning' of a platform.[180] How does a platform relate to the mainstream ecosystem of platforms and how does it help to analyze the dynamics between mainstream and fringe?

3.2 Gab's self-narrative: A seventh platform dimension

A fringe platform explicitly contests the governance and ideology of the mainstream web and provides an alternative to that normativity, thereby aiming to influence and move the ideological premises of the – social media – platform ecology. The self-positioning of its service should be a central aspect of the study of fringe platforms since contention to a mainstream platform is often part of their *raison d'etre*. It is also part of the definition of fringe platforms as proposed by this research. To capture adequately the self-positioning of a fringe platform, one needs to analyze its communication and documentation of a platform's history. Most of the time fringe platforms have some kind of *gründungs* text, in which they declare their grievance and their oppositional norms and values, and account for their practices, in this case contention. Gab frequently expresses its contention and ideological positioning through posts, newsletters, and media performances.

From 2016 until 2019, Gab's communicated core ideology and primary self-identification was that it enabled free speech and online liberty because the mainstream places neglected to do so, or even actively conspired against such freedom. In an email to BuzzFeed News, Torba cited his discontent with the content moderation policies of the mainstream social media networks in particular: "What makes the entirely left-leaning Big Social monopoly qualified to tell us what is 'news' and what is 'trending' and to define what 'harassment' means?" (Kantrowitz 2016).[181] Such is a shared sentiment among conservative outlets (Stelter

180 I will refer to this dimension as the 'self-positioning narrative'.

181 This focus on the law is confirmed and expressed from the start by Gab itself, for example then active - and by now former - Gab's chief communications officer Utsav Sanduja to the *New York Times* in 2016 'Gab bans illegal activities — child pornography, threats of violence, terrorism — and not much else. "Facebook, Twitter and Reddit are taking the path of censorship, Gab does not"(Hess 2016).

2016; Tuttle 2016), conservative publics, and free speech fringe platforms. This 'free speech' attitude is not only consistent with Gabs ideological texts and official communication; it is also present in their technology and informs all aspects of the platform. Part of the reason Gab presents us with an extremely political and ideological, homogenous, conservative, radical and right-wing ecology, is that these deplatformed publics were explicitly courted by the fringe platform, by posturing as a free speech refuge for those exiled by Big Tech tyrants. Gab's detached, fickle, and reactionary moderation praxis is upheld on the basis of their free speech narrative, which demands an absence of governance, and in the process absolves the radical free speech fringe platform from responsibility for the discourse. This is further furnished by Gabs affordances and thus hardcoded in the design, shoving the responsibility of moderation to the publics, under the promise of a free speech environment. Contrarily, the fringe platform itself does little to ensure such an environment.[182]

The narrative of free speech, however, is absolutely key to the platform itself. The importance of a self-narrative can be understood through the terminology of 'governmentality'.[183] The mode of thought that rationalizes Gab's governance, is the value of 'freedom of speech' that is deeply embedded in American public discourse. Gab's governance consists of a combination of their publics, discursive signaling, and affordances, and a simultaneous rejection of adhering to the mainstream norms of setting limitations on hate. Gab defines this governance as political opposition, a position that is further rationalized by the knowledge framework of free speech, liberty, compliance to the first amendment, and anti-censorship. This logic rationalizes Gab's (non)interventionist governance – obscuring itself as a governing institution – and rejects other governing institutions as 'oppressive and censoring'. This self-narrative thus confirms Gab as the sovereign. It defines the rational ground for governance, American identarian free speech and opposition to unfreedom, and presents the governing institution, Gab, with specific modes for intervention, namely hardly any outside of a majority decision and affordances.

Having said this, I argue that Gab is even better understood, not through its self-narrative as a refuge of free speech, but through the process of contention. *Antagonism is*

182 Although Gab allows for significantly more than the mainstream platforms (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018), this does not make it necessarily a proponent of free speech, nor does it absolve the fringe platform of any criticism of their governance. Gab is too toxic and homogenous – in addition to being extremely hierarchical - to women and minorities - who are disproportionately harassed online by the trolls Gab has attracted –, to enjoy this 'free speech' (Ehrenkranz 2017). The simplification of the philosophical and juridical framework of free speech would reduce it to an individual's privilege to anonymously post hate speech on privately owned social media platforms.

183 Remember; 'the logics, rationalities and techniques that render societies governable and enable government and other agencies to enact governance' (Burchell, Gordon, and Miller 1991; Kitchin, Coletta, and McArdle 2017), and 'rationalisation of governmental practice in the exercise of political sovereignty'(Foucault 2004) is enacted through 'the reciprocal constitution of power techniques and forms of knowledge, and of regimes of representation and modes of intervention' (Lemke 2007).

the real identity of Gab. This contestation is expressed in all dimensions of the platform both discursively and materially, in their communication and their affordances. Gab involves its users in its antagonism by framing their activity on the platform as political resistance, and thus as significant in a larger political context. This frame is both a reaction and a reiteration of its outsider status, which – ironically – simultaneously impairs Gab's options to be profitable. The – assumingly – precarious financial position and general dependency on mainstream services and infrastructures, undercut their narrative of success, independence, and resistance, and is probably the reason why the fringe platform shrouds its company (infra)structures in opacity. Framing their pleas for money as an act of resistance and (American) patriotism, is thus a cope. The antagonism causes problems for Gab, making it a subject of scrutiny, while at the same time, its *différence* from the mainstream is what grants Gab significance.[184]

4. Conclusion: Disassembling a public sphere, reassembling a fringe platform

In this chapter, I have analyzed the radical free speech fringe platform Gab as an ecosystem; a multifaceted environment open and connected to the broader ecosystem of the platformized public sphere. By performing a platform analysis, I aimed to unravel how Gab's platform dimensions intersect and contribute to the whole, and subsequently what traits determine Gab as a platform. I conclude that Gab is best understood – and therefore should be studied as – a fringe platform. Through the perspective of a fringe/mainstream dynamic, Gab shows itself as a technology that was born as a referent for contestation over the public sphere. The fringe platform exists in the in-between space, the fringe, from where a mainstream can be contested, and acquires meaning – and followers, technology, content, among other things – in the process. Not only does Gab communicate political participation instead of social interaction, contrary to most social media it seemingly wants to be a point of dispersion instead of convergence. This is exemplified in Gab's remarkable focus on the spaces outside of the platform. A focus that is distinctive of all the characteristics of Gab, of its technological affordances and other technologies[185], its fringe narratives and governance strategies, its publics[186] – who cannot wait to get back to the mainstream –, its content[187]

184 After the Pittsburgh attack, Gab was forced to change its self-narrative and modes of contention. I will elaborate on Gab's transition to an Alt-tech narrative in Chapter 5.

185 Think of the 'Gab trends', the connections to other messaging services, cross-posting, import and export 'your' social media data from the user account, development, the Gab Gitlab, and the Gab Apps, all of which I will come back to in Chapter 4.

186 At least 13 percent of Gabs users in August 2017 were also on Twitter. (Lima et al. 2018). The method used leaves room for many false negatives, that is missed profiles of Gab users that were also on Twitter.

187 Even more so then other social media, Gab's main function seems to be to share outside information, often in the form of links to external content, such as news articles (Lima et al. 2018; Zhou et al. 2019;

and the dissemination of discourses to mainstream places. It seems that Gab functions as some sort of harbor, facilitating a point from where users can again catapult back into the mainstream.

The *Culture of Connectivity* model could not sufficiently incorporate the contentious and relational character of a fringe platform; therefore, I proposed an additional analytical dimension through which these qualities can be captured, namely a platform's self-positioning narrative. The self-narrative and ideological positioning of a platform is vital to the understanding of fringe platforms, and maybe even platforms in general. As stated in the previous section, without an understanding of Gab's counter position and narrative, any analysis will lead to obvious characterizations of Gab. The platform's self-narrative of a free speech platform stands in service of the deployment of its true core discourse, that of antagonism, which intersects with all other platform dimensions. It has informed the communication and presentation of its business models and ownership structures, cultivated its publics and content, and largely determined the fringe platform governance, all of which – I argue – is of major influence on the platform technology itself.

Not only is it necessary to look at Gab as a fringe platform, I argue that it is equally necessary to study platforms as ecosystems compiling a larger ecosystem, in my case the platformized public sphere. This points to another limitation of the *Culture of Connectivity* model, which helps to unravel the dynamics of single platforms as 'microsystems' but has not been further developed to explain how single platforms can be considered as parts of the macrosystem of the platform ecology. Instead of an inquiry into the nature of Gab as a platform, the analysis should be opened up to a broader context, asking the question how platforms perform as part of a wider platform ecosystem. Instead of making the Venn diagram even more complex by adding or altering its analytical dimensions, I suggest that we leave the diagram behind, and work toward a platform studies perspective that emphasizes ecosystems, infrastructures, a political economy framework, and the dispositive. This dissertation applies the perspective of the fringe as an analytical lens, which by nature includes the analysis of infrastructures, dynamics, and contention. The CoC model is made subordinate to the fringe lens while the many assertions and dimensions of the CoC model remain a valuable part of the new lens.

The major contribution of this case study to my understanding of the platformized public sphere is thus that it needs to be studied on a level different from that of the platform as ecosystem for discourse. Nancy Fraser's appeal to not only to include the subaltern subject in the analysis of the public sphere, but also to include counterpublics *an sich*, was predicated on the idea that this inclusion would reveal the nature of the public sphere – as in conflict and incongruous. Similarly, the platformized public sphere needs to be studied *through its*

Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018). An abundance of these links go to alternative sources and outside channels of banned alt-right celebrities or 'alternative' influencers.

fringes, to reveal its nature. This adjustment was not premeditated when I suggested the terminology of the fringe, or when I proposed the alterations of the platform dimensions 'publics', 'governance'. Only after performing the analysis, and with the deplatformization of Gab always at the back of my mind, did I understand how intricately intertwined the microsystem of the platform was with the larger platform ecosystem. The modification goes beyond a mere theoretical tweaking but reflects how platform technology and the web have changed since the publication of the CoC model in 2013. Over the past decade, the platform ecosystem has evolved into an intricate global system of connectivity that has become a worldwide, centralized infrastructure for online communication—a system dominated by mostly American tech companies. Therefore, the relation between platforms as microsystems and platform ecosystems as online infrastructures has become much more complex. The next step is to analyze how Gab relates to a larger ecosystem of connected and co-dependent services. In the next chapter, I will investigate the deplatformization of Gab and through it the platformized public sphere as organized by infrastructures and partner services.

4 Deplatforming Gab
The deplatformization of Gab, the infrastructuralization of platforms, and the platformization of the platform ecology.

1. Introduction

The implication of Gab in the attack on Tree of Life synagogue ensued a new reality. The fringe platform was pushed further to the periphery and dark corners of the platformized public sphere and risked disappearing from the web altogether. Initially, and entirely in character, Gab made fun of the concern and moral panic after the terrorist attack, by celebrating the new mainstream attention, and claiming it had received a million hits per hour after it was reported that the shooter had a Gab profile (Sommer 2018a). However, the controversy caused tech companies to terminate their relationship with Gab, and no longer provide their services. Consequently, Gab became dysfunctional to the extent it had to freeze its signups (Weill 2019). Torba tried to weather the storm by remaining silent and setting Gab's social media (Twitter) accounts on private, but eventually, he was forced to comment on Gab's role in domestic terrorism. Acting on the adage that offense is the best defense, the Gab CEO sought out the safety and control of social media posts,[188] and stated that Gab was under some sort of organized attack by '50,000 bots in under 24 hours', without presenting any evidence, and hinted at a possible involvement of activists (Weill 2019) and even the 'deep state' (Moritz-Rabson 2019a). Under continued pressure for a response in the media, Torba changed his tune and gave NPR the diplomatic quote of "The answer to bad speech, or hate speech, however you want to define that, is more speech. And it always will be" (Torba 2018). Gab did go offline on 28 October 2018 but denied that this was due to a functional meltdown of its services, instead claiming experiments with an invite-only approach to improve user experience (Weill 2019; Moritz-Rabson 2019a). In all likelihood this was a false claim, and Gab was forced offline. Although the immediate attention and outcries had decreased when the fringe platform resurfaced seven days later, Gab

188 These posts go in and out of existence because their profiles are periodically blocked, and possibly will be deleted at some point. I remedied this through screenshots, news articles, and the way-back machine or other repository of Gab communication. This is also the explanation why a number of Gab's statements in this dissertation are either not sourced or the sources are not the source material.

still had difficulty maintaining itself, forcing the fringe platform to undergo infrastructural and ideological changes.

What happened to Gab was dubbed 'deplatforming' and would prove to be a harbinger for the 'deplatforming' of highly controversial platforms in the years to come. Within days of the 6 January attack (2021) on the United States Capitol by a right-wing mob incited by Donald Trump, Big Tech companies started to remove Parler (a microblogging app and Twitter, and thus Gab, alternative) from their services, because the then almost former president had gathered support for the attempted insurrection through the fringe platform (Rondeaux et al. 2022). Apparently, independent services can and will be shut down after controversies if other platform services coordinate such deplatforming.[189] Evidently, MsSM platforms are capable of pushing back radical communities and actors to the fringes of the platform ecosystem. The question is, however, how do you deplatform a platform?

In this chapter, I analyze how fringe platforms depend on services that are under the sphere of influence of Big Tech, in order to understand how the platform ecosystem is governed online, how power is exerted through digital infrastructures, and what this says about the 'platformized' public sphere. A variety of supporting services that provide hosting, publishing, and financial services, among many other things, unveil themselves to be infrastructuralizing components of the platformized web. These services, or complementors, are brought into the Big Tech ecosystem of services through systems of ownerships, network, technical integration and business models, and allow platform technology to expand over the web's infrastructure and become infrastructures for internet activity. This chapter shows that the platform ecosystem is governed by major tech companies through web infrastructures, ownership structures, and partner relations. Because of this, independent services such as

189 I want to note that although the notorious cases of Gab and Parler have been the motivation to conceptualize this specific process as 'deplatformization', there have been many precedents of the deplatforming of a platform service. Alt-right imageboard 8chan has experienced similar actions as deplatformization for example, and Gab itself has been subject to cancellations of partnerships from its conception, often following the same dynamic that would push Parler and Gab offline years later. The first major precedent, however, was when United States based web-infrastructures and website-security company Cloudfare stopped hosting the white supremacist and Neo-Nazi website the *Daily Stormer* in august 2017 over derogatory comments towards Heather Heyer, the woman who was killed during Charlottesville attack. This was rather unsuspected because Cloudfare was known to be 'politically neutral' and in favor of free speech even if it meant its services were open to extreme views. Cloudfare's stance is considered a key instance of major tech companies taking independent action against extremist content, as well as a turning point in the tolerance towards far-right extremism (Flynn 2017). Following Cloudfare, Twitter removed the verification ticks – the blue identifiers next to a profile - of some ultra-conservatives, YouTube has intensified its efforts to make inflammatory content less profitable, and Facebook has even removed the pages of British far-right politicians. The dynamic follows a certain pattern, where a major incident causes public outrage, which can no longer be ignored by mainstream services, which then causes one service to enforce consequences for a violation of its TOU, and other services follow suit.

Gab can be pushed to the periphery of the online. This type of platform power, I argue, is exemplary of the ongoing platformization, that expresses itself in terms of further lock-in through vertical integration, the platformization of web infrastructures, and the infrastructuralization of services platform (Plantin et al. 2018; van Dijck 2021).
Chapter 3 investigated Gab as a single platform and independent platform technology and demonstrated the need to incorporate the relational nature and discursive dimensions of fringe platforms as part of the analysis. An investigation at the microlevel results in a partial analysis, at least where fringe platforms are concerned. There, I focused on the discursive, ideological and narratological positioning of Gab, in other words the way Gab relates itself to the larger platform ecology. In this chapter, I focus on how the larger platform ecology, on which Gab is dependent, positions itself towards Gab. As we will see, this is expressed the most through business relations, ownership structures and economic models, as well as technological integrations. Where previous research on platformization analyzed platform-specific economies (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013; van der Vlist and Helmond 2021), my focus is on the public sphere – including the fringes -, and how ongoing platformization of the public sphere caused Big Tech to become the governing institution.

This chapter is structured as follows: in the next section 'Deplatforming. A Tale of Two Readings.' I start off with a theorization of 'deplatforming', and how this type of governance relates to Gab and to the fringe in general. In the subsequent section 'Deplatformization. Pushing Gab from the public eye', I follow how Gab was deplatformed by losing various infrastructural services and introduce the term 'deplatformization' (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021; forthcoming). To describe this process, I emphasize the difference in infrastructural impact between the deplatforming of a user or channel, and the deplatformization of an independent platform service. Next, in Section 4 '(De)Platformization. The stack and the tree', I use the example of the deplatformization of Gab to theorize the platformization of the public sphere. For this purpose, I brief an assortment of theoretical contributions to the platformization framework – such as the infrastructuralization of platforms, the redrawing of 'walls' and platform boundaries, and the monopolization of certain layers of the web in order to acquire control over the rest of it -, while integrating the concept of deplatformization to that framework. It is argued that deplatformization is in fact not the opposite of platformization, but its logical consequence. In the conclusion of this chapter, I take it one step further and maintain how platformization is the lens through which deplatformization should be understood, and likewise that deplatformization cases are a moment of 'breakdown' (Star and Ruhleder 1996), through which the platformized public sphere can be studied.

2. Deplatforming: A tale of two readings.

In 2016, due to the scope of the misinformation campaigns targeting the Anglo-Saxon elections, social media companies redirected their focus from moderating predominantly Islamic terrorist threats, to the other phenomena that endanger our spaces for information and deliberation, such as fake news and hate speech (Wilson and Land 2020).[190] Moderating speech, as a form of governance by platforms, needs justification, and the tech platforms did so primarily through their terms of service (ToS). Violating these terms would have consequences for the violators' access to the service, with the ultimate consequence – or most severe tool form of punishment – being a complete ban from the platform.[191] Social media companies use this praxis of 'deplatforming' as a tactic to remove or restrict the exposure and influence of toxic or extremist actors, channels, discourses or even ideologies on their platforms (Rogers 2020). As Tarleton Gillespie (2018, 5) argues, "Platforms must, in some form or another, moderate: both to protect one user from another, or one group from its antagonists, and to remove the offensive, vile, or illegal—as well as to present their best face to new users, to their advertisers and partners, and to the public at large." Having to moderate, Gillespie points out, they have somewhat reluctantly become the custodians of the web.

Deplatforming is understood as a part of 'cancel culture', which is "a contemporary expression that describes the larger phenomenon of public vilification for offensive speech or action" (Rogers 2020, 226). The term deplatforming became part of the non-specialist public debate in 2019 when major social media services like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter – joined by other smaller platform services – suspended and removed a variety of actors and groups, typified as far-right and alt-right hate groups. This wave included the removal of some toxic (semi)-professional content creators and controversial local celebrities or opinion leaders whose channels were removed in one big sweep from several or all

190 Episode 2 of the 2021 podcast *Sudhir breaks the internet* called 'The Garbage Can Model of Decision Making' (Venkatesh, 2021) gives an inside look into content moderation decision making of Facebook, and takes us inside Facebook, as he and his former colleagues tried to battle everything, from spam to terrorist content and child pornography, while the tools at their disposal, and logics Facebook's moderation strategy was based on, where predominantly for battling spam (through algorithms). The logics of battling spam did very poorly fit the more complicated human interactions that one would find with harassment, radicalization, and hate speech. In addition to the absence of a specific strategy for moderating speech, the episode stresses the deficiency of resources/time/manpower/expertise/technology and so forth, the priority of user engagement and data revenue over user safety, and the technological (and data) solutionist attitude of project managers within the company.

191 However, there tend to be exemptions for 'military or government entities' that violate a site's terms prohibiting the use or promotion of violence. This exemption has stopped the banning of accounts like President Trump's when he threatened violence against North Korea, whereas similar actions by an ordinary user would result in a ban or suspension (Lane 2019).

mainstream services. When such sequence of efforts takes place, and an actor has been 'cancelled' from most services and has no (social media) platform left, this is referred to as being 'deplatformed'. Deplatforming thus denotes the removal of multiple social media accounts of a single accountholder and proposes an either causal effect of, or joined effort by, the major social media companies. Neither cancel culture nor deplatforming are necessarily a new (media) phenomenon but refer just as much to (mass) media outlets, physical stages, and metaphorical stages like jobs, awards, or honorary positions.

Generally, cancelling or deplatforming refers to denying an actor certain ways of expression or other forms of participation in public life; but limiting reach, connectivity, or transmitting powers also fall under this terminology. A social media platform can change the way it curates and disseminates content, for example through adapting its recommendation systems but also by moderating query results, sometimes referred to as shadow banning.[192] Another way to take action against an unwanted actor without denying it a space per se, is to limit the actor's capacity to generate revenue. Examples of this practice, often referred to as demonetizing, include removing brands from (App)stores, revoking a content creator's premier status, or the classification of outlets as insensitive or inappropriate so advertisers can choose to avoid running their adds on these videos,[193] thereby dropping advertising revenue for the channels.[194]

Research on the effectiveness of deplatforming (Donovan 2019) indicates that it is generally effective in the case of famous content creators and popular channels. In a coordinated effort, alt-right trolls Milo Yiannopoulos and Alex Jones have been largely removed from a center position in the online realm and no longer dominate the news cycle (Kraus 2018;

192 In an attempt to fight Qanon conspiracy theories Facebook and Instagram have reduced the visibility of such tropes in their search functions, alongside the deplatforming of conspiracy channels and users (Kist and van den Bos, Menno 2021).

193 The latter refers to the famous moderation controversy of early 2017 called the 'Adpocalypse' (Dunphy 2017) when YouTube took action against controversial, hateful and inappropriate content in videos, by installing a new regime of classification which gave advertisers the option to exclude entire categories of content from their advertising efforts. The measure was taken due to pressure from major advertisers, leading the academic community to align with unpopular fringe communities in their concern on the 'public utility like role of digital platforms whose gatekeeping function remains largely outside the purview of public debate and deliberation' (Kumar 2019).

194 Perhaps the example of deplatforming that contains almost all the elements of the above description was the cancellation and demonetization of recording artist and alleged child predator R Kelly. Due to the public outrage and a call for reconning on unpunished sexual misconduct by powerful men, as voiced by the #MeToo movement, pressure piled on institutions and platforms, including a 'mute R Kelly'-hashtag, to hold the artist accountable. After Robert Kelly was first fired from his record label, a metaphorical stage, he was subsequently banned from Spotify's playlist function in an attempt to make the platform less profitable for both the artist and his management, as the money - so was argued - functioned as a shield against accountability.

Kist and van den Bos, Menno 2021), and their revenue has dropped drastically (Koebler 2018; Beauchamp 2018). Additionally, on forum-structured social media like Reddit, entire discourses and communities can and have been effectively deplatformed.[195] Work that questions the effectiveness of deplatforming (Urman, Ho, and Katz 2020; Ali et al. 2021)[196] often argues that the toxic content does not actually disappear from the web but moves to different, less moderated spaces, also called the 'Waterbed effect'. Once users move to these fringe spaces, it is argued that the deplatformed publics harden their conviction (Rogers 2020, 215).[197] This suggests that deplatforming specific spaces makes the platformized public sphere at large more toxic. The intrinsic connectivity of the platformized web therefore begs the question: if deplatforming is deemed effective, then for whom? Effective for one online space, or effective for the public sphere at large? However, such argumentation is highly speculative, and the aforementioned Reddit case, as well as research on the removal of QAnon SubReddits and the deplatforming of Qanon discourses by Facebook, Twitter and TikTok do not confirm these effects. Moreso, they even saw an overall decline of harassment in the observed spaces and a decline of toxic actors' audiences, even in the fringe spaces (Chandrasekharan et al. 2017; Tiffany 2020; Rogers 2020). What we do know is that a lack of moderation does harm. Among scholars there seems to be a hesitance to confirm the – at least partial – effectiveness of deplatforming.[198]

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195 In 2015 Reddit closed down the hate riddled subreddits *r/fatpeoplehate* and *r/coontown*. Users of these spaces either left Reddit or moved to other subreddits, which did not see a significant increase in extreme speech (Chandrasekharan et al. 2017; Rogers 2020, 215).

196 As this paragraph will show, despite the admiration I have for the ground-breaking methods and line-up of brilliant scholars who are all precursors in the study of Gab, I disagree with the conclusions of Ali et al (2021). In the press release of the article Jeremy Blackburn was quoted suggesting that moderation tools are inadequate (fighting disinformation) and that we need "socio-technical solutions to socio-technical problems". However, 'deplatforming' is just as socio-technical as other "creative ideas to not get rid of people, but hopefully push them in a positive direction". Our unease with deplatforming is warranted considering the current democratic deficit in platform moderation and the privatization of public space by Big Tech, which is where we should focus our criticism. Source: https://www.eurekalert.org/news-releases/924295.

197 A similar argument is made for discourses, where banning tropes draws attention to suppressed materials and moves users searching for them to the 'darker corners of the Internet' (Chandrasekharan et al. 2017). The idea that hidden or banned content intensifies the search for it, is sometimes referred to as a 'Streisand effect' but this is a bit of a silly name.

198 This dissertation subscribes to the importance of analyzing deplatforming efforts at the level of the platformized public sphere, instead of at the level of a single social medium. Having said that, much of the focus on the possible 'waterbed effects' is rather one-sided. If one focusses on the radical publics or toxic content, deplatforming seems to move toxicity from public channels to private groups - or from mainstream to the fringe services – and thus as problem shifting. However, if one focusses on the potency - or center position - of the space where the toxicity occurs, one might argue that deplatforming addresses the problem. After all, media have distinctions in social use, connectivity, and affordances,

As much as scholars are skeptical about platforms banning users, MsSM themselves are even less eager to take up the responsibilities of gatekeepers of the public debate. Besides considerations of labor, resources, and liability (Gillespie 2018, 6), active moderation opens social media platforms up to public criticism, more than inaction does. Public pressure generally preceded waves of deplatforming, as seen with the example of the 'Adpocalypse' in footnote 193. Other major platforms and services often follow suit once one platform starts taking moderating action, breaking the status quo of active inaction, because now a passive moderating policy becomes more controversial than (active) banning. This can result in the suspension and banishment of hundreds of accounts by several platforms at the same time. Of course, not acting is a moderation decision as well, yet in public perception often less scrutinized than action, a governance style that is in accordance with neoliberal management discourse.

The cumulative mass bannings aiming to remove communities, local celebrities and outlets, or even discourses from the public debate are often referred to as 'a purge' (Ohlheiser 2016). Both the 2016 and 2019 deplatforming of online celebrities (Hern 2018) as well as the Adpocalypse (Dunphy 2017) were part of such purges. The moderated content always was against the platform rules but remained unmoderated until public pressure ensued. So, even though moderation – and with it deplatforming – is justified through the terms of service (ToS), the way in which deplatforming unfolds betrays a dynamic that goes beyond enforcing the rules. Deplatforming is often subservient to, and the agglomeration of, a dynamic between a public, the new guardians of the platformized public sphere, and fringe actors.

Deplatformed users report feelings of injustice and observe asymmetric governance. Many of the users on Gab.ai claim they joined Gab because their accounts were suspended and/or banned from Facebook and Twitter because they posted political beliefs and ideas in contravention of the status quo (Lane 2019), something we confirmed with our own research.[199] The aforementioned controversial alt-right celebrities[200] have used their audiences to decry their removal off the major social media platforms, and stage protests on the platforms that have removed them, proclaiming themselves as martyrs of free speech. In truth, their content, often in violation of TOU, was always meant to be controversial and help attract attention. The term 'deplatforming' is deployed by these celebrities to express

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and thus do these online spaces have a different reach, different functions, and to all likelihood different impact on our public and democratic life. Having said that, I would argue that there are an abundance of valid concerns, objections and doubts on the concept and the praxis of deplatforming. There is a democratic misfit of private mega companies taking over public and governmental functions, like governing the public sphere, banning - or allowing for that matter - all kinds of actors, tropes, and activity access to the public debate, in an opaque and inconsistent and devote of value-based decision making.

199 This refers to the Gab Project as explained in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3.

200 Milo Yiannopoulos, Laura Loomer, Louis Farrakhan, Alex Jones, Paul Joseph Watson, among others.

victimhood or victimization, claiming they were consorted and shunned of their basic rights by liberal elites.

So, while the praxis of deplatforming demonstrates a shift in what is considered acceptable on social media, the terminology functions as a counternarrative or strive against the governance of online public debate by the tech giants, signifying allegations of political censorship and cultural decline (Mulhall 2019; Rogers 2020, 214). This narrative of political censorship constructed by conservative and populist outlets is ahistorical and often made in bad faith[201]. Nevertheless, 'deplatforming' serves as a powerful signifier for a highly relevant discourse on the problematic power Big Tech has over the public debate. The duplicity of the term, describing a phenomenon while at the same time being weaponized to express reactionary feelings as a narrative of resistance, is characteristic of Gab and their deplatformed publics. In the next section, I describe the deplatforming of the platform Gab itself, and pose a new terminology which explicitly links moderation through infrastructure to the process of platformization but is outside of any victim narrative.

3. Deplatformization: Pushing Gab from the public eye.

Gab's relationship with mainstream social media always has always been informed by deplatforming logics. Not only was Gab's initial self-narrative – or discursive dimension – built around the notion of resisting censorship of the mainstream services, but Gab benefitted greatly from every purge these platforms enacted[202]. However, while Gab has gained from cancel culture by welcoming many new (banned) subscribers, it has also suffered deplatforming itself. The fringe platform has an elaborate history of being denied access to mainstream distribution networks, online monetization abilities, and infrastructural services; as a result, Gab is consistently pushed to the periphery of the platform ecosystem. This process of deplatforming a platform is dubbed 'deplatformization' (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021; forthcoming) and shifts focus from a single actor being shunned from platforms to entire platforms being pushed to the periphery of the platform ecosystem.

This section details how Gab was 'pushed' towards the fringes of the platformized public sphere through the denial of infrastructural and supporting services. Leaning on the article "Deplatformization and the governance of the platform ecosystem" (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021), I distinguish three specific ways of deplatforming a platform,

201 The cancel culture narrative is mostly a trope of a fabricated culture war, and efforts to govern online spaces are seldomly part of a left-wing attack on speech. It is a right-wing mirage used to discredit efforts towards social justice. The real history of moderation and online censorship walks along the lines of enforcing US puritan views and copyright laws, targeting spam and terrorism, and only recently involves deplatforming hate speech and conspiracy. Deplatforming policies have targeted anorexia hashtags on Instagram (Reynolds 2016) and erotic content and LGBT conversations on Tumblr (Leskin 2019).

202 As elaborated on in the last chapter in the section 'Publics and Content'.

namely: 1) Disconnecting the platform from infrastructural services, 2) blocking access to the networked distribution and 3) demonetization, in Sections 3.1/3.3. These three categories of services are not mutually exclusive but represent three specific strategies of 'deplatformization'. In the final Section 3.4, I differentiate between the deplatforming of a single account holder or channel by social media services, and the deplatformization of independent platform technologies by Big Tech companies and their partners, based on infrastructural impact.

3.1 Disconnecting the platform from infrastructural services

The first strategy of pushing Gab out of the mainstream ecosystem is by disconnecting the platform from infrastructural services including domain registrars and storage services, or hosting, but also cloud analytics. Grossly simplifying, a 'name registrar' licenses a website to an address, and a 'domain name service' connects a platform to its users. These are services a platform must have in order to be online and accessible. Whereas data storage and computing services can be bought and managed by the platform itself, on private servers (rather than via cloud services), a lack of security would make it extremely vulnerable to attacks.

Until September 2017, Gab was hosted by AsiaRegistry a domain registrar that provides webhosting services. However, in the wake of 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville and the white supremacist murder that took place there, AsiaRegistry threatened to quit working with the fringe platform if it did not ban infamous online Neo-Nazis from their platform, who were mocking the victim. The ICANN-accredited registrar justified the request by claiming it violated their abuse policy.[203] Gab initially complained[204] but then quickly complied to the demands, which in turn caused a discussion among its users (Robertson 2017; Hayden 2017) exemplifying the Janus-faced position of a free speech fringe platform. Gab – intermittently – has to comply to the TOU of its partners, while also keeping up its radical free speech position. Gab defended itself by stating they could not remain online without a domain registrar, and moved to a new host soon afterwards, ending up with GoDaddy which is the largest ICANN-accredited registrar in the world. For its data storage and analytics, Gab was initially customer of Microsoft, but in August 2018, Torba released a statement that Microsoft Azure had threatened to suspend Gab from its cloud-computing services due to the inciting and antisemitic posts of, yet another, famous neo-Nazi (Krazit 2018; Brandom 2018; Sommer 2018a), while Microsoft Azure referred to its acceptable use policy as justification (Fleishman 2018). Again, Gab complied indicating the continuing influence and pressure of hosting services on Gab's governance. The partnership would still

203 https://www.asiaregistry.com/docs/asi/Abuse-Policy-Domain-Names.pdf.

204 "*BREAKING: Gab's domain registrar has given us 5 days to transfer our domain or they will seize it. The free and open web is in danger.*" pic.twitter.com/Irl6KO5Xmr.

— Gab (@getongab) September 18, 2017 (now deleted).

dissolve in the months after, repeating the sequence of first complaint, then compliance, and eventually a new partnership.

This process intensified following the aforementioned Pittsburg shooting of October 2018, when several different services nigh simultaneously terminated their relationship with Gab, among them the domain registrar GoDaddy and Joyent, which are software and services company providing application virtualization and cloud computing (Carbone 2018), and Backblaze which is a provider of data and cloud storage and computer backup services (Fried 2018).[205] The following days Gab announced the termination of their partnerships and stated that it expected to be down for weeks. Gab disappeared for a week and when it came back online on November 4th 2018, it sought out supporting services that had an ideology or alliance that was closer to theirs, or at least further away from the mainstream control and influence. This fringe position was personified in Gab's new domain register Epik. This service is by some considered to be an alt-right technology (Hayden 2019), not in the least because of its extremely controversial CEO, who has suggested that most of the far-right users on Gab are actually "liberal trolls" who want to give "enemies of freedom an excuse"[206], mirroring the gaslighting Gab routinely deploys. When Epik purchased webhosting platform Sybil Systems in 2019, Gab moved its residency there. Through the December 2019 SEC filing, one can know that Sibyl – at that time – provides the internet infrastructure for Gab (Dougherty and Hayden 2019). I will come back to Epik in Chapter 5.

Another company Gab relied on after October 2018, was the digital security provider Cloudfare. Cloudflare's CEO Matthew Prince came out publicly as a 'free speech absolutist'. In the past Cloudflare had dropped 8chan (Prince 2019) and the neo-Nazi website the Daily Stormer as customers, but Prince has since stated he regretted this decision. Pertaining Gab, Cloudflare declared that "deep infrastructure companies like Cloudflare should not be in the position to make editorial decisions based on content" (Jurecic 2018). Cloudflare also decided to hide the identity of Gab's new web host. Gab claims that it no longer hosts its service in the cloud but has moved to renting hardware in an undisclosed data center. Generally, Gab moved its hosting and cloud computing partnerships to the fringe, in some cases choosing DIY technology, but sometimes just out of the public eye.

3.2 Blocking access to the networked distribution

A second strategy to deplatform a platform, is by blocking its access to networked distribution of the platform ecosystem. Instead of a complete ban, this strategy limits the reach, connectivity, and/or transmitting powers of a platform, and impedes its ability to attract us-

205 These were not the only services. Payment processor PayPal immediately banned Gab after the attack quickly followed by payment processor Stripe, blogging platform Medium, and e-commerce service Shopify, among others (Carbone 2018; Liptak 2018).

206 https://twitter.com/robmonster/status/1067507603125739521.

ers and disseminate content. Limiting Gab's reach by removing its accounts on other social media, for example, makes it harder for the fringe platform to advertise itself and propagate its ideas. While limiting access to Gab by removing it from search engines or App stores, makes it harder for users to connect to the fringe platform technology itself. The fact that Big Tech can reduce the number of users and activity on a (fringe) platform in this manner, also shows how vital they are in the dissemination and curation of platform technology in the platformized public sphere. Google, for instance, choses to retract 8chan (or 8kun) from their search engine, without notice or appeal options (Moss 2021). The company owns upwards of 90% market share of global search since the start of the ban in august 2015[207], so the impact of such an act of deplatforming is severe.

To draw attention to its content, Gab has accounts on mainstream platforms such as YouTube, Medium[208], and Twitter. In the case of the latter, they had a GetOnGab account which has been taken down from time to time since 2017, and who cut off Gab's access to its API permanently since October 2018, again without specifying the motivation. Deplatforming Gab *accounts* does not completely sever the ties of Gab and these mainstream social media, because these publishing platforms function both as resources and references, and form key nodes on the fringe service (Woolley, Pakzad, and Monaco 2019). In other words, banning Gab accounts does not keep Gab users from linking to content on these platforms. As mentioned in the previous chapter, fringe platforms link more often to content outside of its service than mainstream social media platforms do. For Gab this meant that some of the most frequently linked to and mentioned domains were to mainstream platforms such as YouTube and Twitter (Zannettou, Bradlyn, et al. 2018, 1010–11). While a service cannot prevent getting hyperlinked to, the merit of platform technology lies in its connectivity, meaning that integration with publishing services and video platforms is key for any platform, and especially for fringe platforms who are relational in nature. Through prohibiting API possibilities Gab becomes isolated.

For access *to* Gab the platform is largely dependent on app stores that offer the service as an app, which is vital for generating activity on mobile devices. Already in December 2016, Gab's submission for the sale of its app through the iOS App Store was rejected, officially due to presence of pornography on their service. An updated Gab app that blocked pornographic content by default, was again rejected for admittance to the Apple store, this time on the basis of violation Apple's restrictions on hate speech. A similar conflict ensued with Google. While the Gab Android app was initially accepted in, and sold through, the Google Play Store following the launch in May 2017, Google followed Apple's decision to remove the Gab-App due to the violation of Google's hate speech policy (Neidig 2017).

207 https://gs.statcounter.com/search-engine-market-share/all/worldwide/2015.

208 Medium is an online or e-publishing platform that published both professional contributions and amateur blog entrees.

Hence, without app stores, Gab's reach was limited to its own website, but access to this website was also curtailed in various ways, for example, the disabling of Gab's in-browser extension called Dissenter by Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox. Eventually Gab acquiesced that a Gab App could not be retailed, asking its users to enter the platform through their browsers, a testament to the vital importance of GAFAM-services for accessing the platformized public sphere.

3.3 Demonetization

The third strategy to deplatforming of a platform is demonetization. Demonetization refers to taking away a platform's financial infrastructure, and thereby compromising its business models. Financial services often function as a third party that secure the transaction and give the exchange legitimacy. Payment processing platforms especially are a necessity for all sorts of online financial traffic such as credit card transactions, as are crowdfunding platforms that enable Gab to receive donations or pledges by users or sponsors. Apart from sending money through snail mail, or making direct donations to a bank account, a platform needs financial services for almost all forms of financial exchange (e.g., collecting money, selling merchandise, setting up crowdsourcing). The demonetization strategy overlaps with the two earlier mentioned strategies, but now applied to generating revenue. One could argue that blocking access to an app store would also be an act of demonetization, which shows that these categories are not mutually exclusive.

After the Pittsburgh shootings, the first major financial service to withdraw their facilities was PayPal; the company terminated its relationship with Gab in 2018, based on its review of user accounts that may engage in the "perpetuation of hate, violence or discriminatory intolerance" (Sommer 2018a; Liptak 2018). This decision was quickly followed by payment processing platform Stripe who suspended Gab's account, and then also by e-commerce and web shop provider Shopify (Carbone 2018). As explained in chapter 3, Gab already had very limited monetization options compared to other platform services, and depended heavily on online crowdsourcing efforts. So, when the fringe platform announced in April 2019 that they were no longer offered services by StartEngine – a securities brokerage firm that helps companies prepare regulatory filings and sell investment shares to the public – through which most of Gab's visible revenue was collected (Dougherty and Hayden 2019), Gab had no business model left.

When it became clear that maintaining a business relation with regular online financial services was no longer possible, Gab turned to the 'alternative' world of cryptocurrency and with it the crypto-token payment processing services. However, in January 2019 both cryptocurrency exchange called *Coinbase* and payment processing platform called *Cash App* closed the accounts held by Gab and those of Andrew Torba personally. Now that neither mainstream payment processors, nor the more well-known crypto services – most of them aligned with mainstream platform services – would maintain business relations with the

fringe platform, Gab announced on January 22nd 2019, that it had formed a partnership with Second Amendment Processing[209], a payment company similar in functionality to Adyen. Shortly after this announcement, the founder of SAP came under scrutiny due to a Southern Poverty Law Centre (SPLC) investigation that accused him of being investigated and convicted of financial crimes more than a decade earlier. In March 2019, Gab announced that it had "decided to seek other capital raising alternatives", and removed credit card payment options (Dougherty and Hayden 2019).

3.4 Deplatformization ≠ Deplatforming

The cancelling of Gab shows many similarities with the way the controversial actors who fled to the fringe platform were deplatformed. This includes the initially undecisive but suddenly cascading execution of deplatforming, the specific power dynamic between the fringe and the mainstream, and the fact that it was not solely a digital affair.[210] The most striking parallel, however, is how the cancellation draws a lot of questions about the governing actors, i.e. the tech companies, that push these communities and platforms offline. The infrastructural services that terminated their customer relations with Gab communicate inconsistently about their governance, and provide iffy justification, often only in retrospect. Most of the time, pornography, or general incompliance with the TOU are cited as motives for the termination of services (Weill 2018); in both cases this justification falls short, especially, since these services have not seldomly declared in the (recent) past not to discontinue any partnership with free speech – or any other – platforms. It fuels the suspicion that these bannings are actually on the basis of the 'political' utterances that fall under hate speech restrictions, but that tech companies try to avoid looking politically motivated. To reiterate, this mannerism of governing action has the guise of being motivated by the management of the public image and public relations, and consequently that deplatformization is spurred by controversy and damage control, instead of a value based or norm informed praxis.

Despite the similarities between deplatforming and deplatformization, they signify something fundamentally different. As stated, deplatformization describes the cooperative effort to push back encroaching extreme (rightwing) platforms to the fringes of the ecosystem by denying them the infrastructural services needed to function online. The major difference between 'deplatforming' and 'deplatformization' – and the primary reason to introduce a new term – is the difference in infrastructural impact. Pulling an online cloud service (e.g. Microsoft Azure) from a specific platform (e.g. Gab) because it offers a haven to far-right communities is a tactic that goes beyond a content moderation strategy. If applied systemically, this impacts not just the position of a single (alt-right) platform but affects

209 https://www.secondamendmentprocessing.com/.

210 An example of an offline form of deplatforming took place in December 2018, when conservative non-profit Turning Point USA removed Gab from the list of sponsors of their student action summit.

the dynamics and infrastructure of the ecosystem as a whole, which is hierarchical and corporate in nature. So, while 'deplatforming' refers to an act of self-governance —platforms that remove posts and block account holders who produce content or discourses that violates their Terms of Use —, 'deplatformization' refers to a broader praxis of controlling the ecosystem. Such efforts of major mainstream tech companies push the unwanted communities and controversial platforms not only from their own services, but to the edge of the ecosystem (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021, 4).

Besides its infrastructural impact, deplatformization is also different from deplatforming with regards to what it shows us about organizational and infrastructural model of the Web and how platform power is distributed through it. It is this power that shapes the conditions by which Gab can be ejected from the bigger platform ecology and platformized public sphere. In the next section, I theorize that deplatformization is not so much a moderation praxis but alludes to the broader dynamics of governance resulting from the platformization of the web.

4. (De)Platformization: The stack and the tree

The deplatformization of Gab unearthed where power is located in the platformized public sphere. What is made apparent is how an independent service can be shunned from the Web through the cancellation of its infrastructural services. In the words of Danny O'Brien of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a non-profit digital rights group, "The issue is not 'we won't let this person into our home. It's more 'we won't offer you electricity or plumbing,' the things that run your house in the first place" (Hayden 2017). Why is the platformized public sphere so reliant on partnerships with infrastructural services? And why do Big Tech platforms, which are private companies, have the power to regulate speech beyond their own social media services?

In this section, I explain how the monopolization of specific layers of the web and the subsequent vertical integration of data flows by GAFAM companies – all of which are processes of platformization – substantiated the platform power that is needed for deplatformization efforts to take place. I elaborate on how the platformized public sphere is governed through its infrastructures in the following order, first I explain how Big Tech companies govern the web through partnerships and hierarchal structure of the web (Section 4.1). Subsequently (Section 4.2), I elaborate on how the technological connections between platform technologies or technical boundary resources (Ghazawneh 2012) are the infrastructural anchors of our platformized online, and how they able Big Tech to create vertical 'walled gardens'[211] across the trunk of the web. And finally, in Section 4.3, I draw the conclusion that deplatformization is a symptom and extension of the process of platformization. Deplafor-

211 This term will be explained in Section 4.2 and Footnote 227.

mization can only be studied at the meso-level of the platformized public sphere. Therefore, I argue that denying an independent platform its infrastructures should be studied through as platformization, and through the fringe lens, focusing on infrastructures, business and ownership models, and power relations.

4.1 Governance through partnerships (the stack)

The process of deplatformization depends on the withdrawing of access to infrastructural services. For this to be possible two things must be true; 1) there need to be infrastructures or infrastructural services that are vital for the functioning of platform services, and 2) a governing institution must be able to control access to such a function. While the first condition evokes a technological organization of the web as layered – and thus ironically cannot be shaped as a web or network -, the second condition implies an organization based on power. In the hierarchical organization of the web both 'conditions' are met, which enables the governance of platforms through infrastructures and partnerships. Let's unpack both 'conditions' to endorse this statement.

When Gab lost access to cloud architecture, data storage and analytics, identification or login services, pay systems, and other services, these services showed that they are a necessity to other services, and thus can be viewed as infrastructural. Notably most of these supporting services – or partner services – that are key to the praxis of deplatformization are not called 'Facebook' or 'Microsoft'. The platform ecology is thus not governed solely by the GAFAM companies; instead it is the effect of a concerted dynamics between Big Tech's major platforms and smaller supporting services that form an infrastructural core (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 12). What's important to understand is that these partner services have infrastructural power, due to place in the internet's structure.

The organization of the internet is captured by the idea of 'the stack'. Now, the stack is a metaphor that envisions, in the case of computing, the web as a layered entity. There are several specific and more detailed interpretations of the metaphor[212], most notably *the protocol stack*[213] and the stack as referring to data structures, but each iteration of the metaphor expresses the hierarchal and infrastructural nature of the web. The web is here

212 A good example of a compelling image of the stack can be found on the blog of the *institute of network cultures* <https://networkcultures.org/geert/2020/11/10/principles-of-stacktivism/>, where founder Geert Lovink quotes Marc Tuters in his review (Tuters 2017) of Bratton's *The stack: On software and sovereignty* with the following definition of the stack metaphor; 'The Stack model is intended to include all technological systems as part of a singular planetary-scale computer, a kind of Spaceship Earth 2.0, updated to reflect the demands of the Anthropocene era' (Lovink 2020).

213 The protocol stack refers to seven layers of network protocols defined in the Open Systems Interconnection model which help standardize communication between computer systems. They include hardware, datalinks, the network layer, the internet protocols, interfaces and applications. Source: https://www.techtarget.com/searchnetworking/definition/OSI.

not envisioned as a network, but as a layered structure, where the layers form foundations for those on top of them, becoming less visible and more infrastructural as you ascend.[214] For the web this means that users, interfaces and probably also social media services, email and search engines will be on top, and hardware and the internet's coded protocols are at the bottom. In between these two ends, you will find everything less infrastructural than a Web protocol, but more so than, for example, a streaming service. When the services in the infrastructural layers of the stack terminated their partnership with Gab, the fringe service was in jeopardy. How then should we understand these complementors and partnerships in the context of the platformization of our public sphere?

The cancelation of services, partnerships, or business relationships of one tech company with another is in itself not necessarily problematic: these services are allowed to pick their business relationships, set their rules (TOU) and enforce them. An argument for self-regulation stands, even if we take into account that the motivation for moderative action does not have to be willingness (to partner with a service) but can also be pressure on the basis of liability or customer satisfaction. An example of this is when Gab was threatened into complying to Asiaregistry TOU – presumably a demand of the registry's customers, which are other platform services. However, the argument for self-regulation becomes unsatisfactory when the infrastructural power of companies located at the lower layers of the stack is, combined with concentration of ownership in a few private companies, increases the impact of losing access to their services to such a degree, that instead of being denied a customer relation, a platform is now denied access to the service entirely. The top ten companies that offer hosting services have around half of the market,[215] and the owners of the larger registrars are almost exclusively within the same professional network. Thus, when a platform falls out of favor with their conglomerate, it runs the risk of becoming non-existent altogether. This is also true for financial services, especially Appstores of which there are only two major players, and cloud services of which three major ones and a few smaller ones dominate the market.

These infrastructural services have demonstrably strong relationships to Big Tech. Not only does GAFAM own several major services within the same layer of the stack – Facebook owns WhatsApp and Instagram while Google owns YouTube, the Chrome browser and Google Maps – they are also present in other layers of the stack, such as the hegemony of Microsoft and Amazon for cloud services, or Google and Apple for networked distribution, among them App stores, which were vital in the deplatformization of Parler and Gab.[216]

214 Or descend, this is not consistent throughout different usages of the metaphor. I choose for infrastructures, hardware, and protocols at the bottom and services, users, and software at the top.

215 See https://hostadvice.com/marketshare/ or https://www.hostingadvice.com/how-to/largest-web-hosting-companies/.

216 This is just a small selection of GAFAM owning major platforms and infrastructural services. For example, Amazon owns streaming services Twitch and Prime apart from their online retail, while Microsoft

Beyond past or present ownership, these infrastructural services can also be under the influence of GAFAM companies via network relations[217] and partnerships.[218] In the case of Gab, this convergence of ownership in social media platforms resulted in an overdependency on the companies it rebelled against. Twitter, for example, not only terminates the Gab accounts from its platform, but can also takes away Gab's access to other services. A non-compliance of Gab and/or Gabbers with the guidelines of partner services like Twitter-owned Periscope, causes those services to terminate their dealings with the fringe platform. In this manner deplatformization efforts are examples of rule-setting power (Castells et al. 2009): which is the strive of individual platforms to control the larger ecosystem.

4.2 Platformization and vertical walled gardens (the tree)

What the metaphor of the stack cannot capture, is the manner in which Big Tech to monopolizes the web. A stack envisions similar layers pilled on each other, while the structure of the web is actually asymmetrical, where some elements of the structure are vital. For that reason, José van Dijck proposes the descriptor of 'the tree' to emphasize the hierarchical and interdependent nature of our information ecosystems (van Dijck 2021). This metaphor cuts up the web in three components, the roots, the trunk, and the branches. The roots represent

owns the major social network LinkedIn and has a dominant share in cloud-based office software, most recently exemplified with MS Teams. These are examples of how Big Tech expands over the stack, which will be discussed in section 4.3.2.

217 Relations of network pertain to the informal relations between platforms, or otherwise non-partnership relations, for example CEO's that are present in the same social circle. These are hard to map. An entry point for relations of network would be to investigate the co-founders of these infrastructural services. For example, the mobile payment service *Cash App* that broke relations with Gab is developed is part of *Square, Inc*, which a Sillicon Valley financial service, service aggregator and mobile payment system, was founded in 2009 by - among others - Jack Dorsey, the head of Twitter. Similarly, *A Medium Corporation* which owns the publishing service Medium, was co-founded by the Evan Williams who is also a co-founder of Twitter. Another co-founder of *A Medium Corporation* is also the owner of blogspot.com (Panzarino 2013). In this dissertation I do not strive to prove network relations between Tech companies and will leave it at this anecdotal evidence, but an elaborate effort to map co-founder relations would be interesting.

218 While ownership relations are an obvious entry point of power, speculation on the importance of network relations remains rather speculative. Official partnerships, however, are very indicative and formative of the power structures in the platformized public sphere, while generally public knowledge. Social media platforms launch partner programmes to attract partners and to solicit contributions that extend the platform's value, reach, and influence (van der Vlist 2022). Such certified and approved partnership are sometime the only way to get the most privileged access to businesses (Helmond et al., 2019), in the case of social media platforms, the datafied audiences. Big Tech engages in partnerships with market-leading global firms (including Fortune Global 500 companies) across various markets and industries that offer their own software tools, products, services, and partner networks to their customers (van der Vlist 2022, 152–53), giving such companies enormous influence in several sectors, and hegemonic control in a few.

the infrastructural systems on which the Internet is built—from cables and data centers to hardware devices; the trunk represent the intermediary services among them the social media platforms; and the branches represent the sectoral applications which are built on platform services in the intermediary layer (trunk) and enabled by the digital infrastructure (roots) (van Dijck 2021, 5–7).[219] Monopolizing certain chunks of the tree to gain control over the whole system is not a peaceful and gradual process, it is a source of platform power. The shape of the tree allows for the identification of the strategic and infrastructural forms of power that are distributed across the platform ecosystem (van Dijck 2021; van der Vlist 2022).

There are three ways of platformization that can be explained through the tree metaphor, namely vertical integration[220], cross-sectorization[221], and lastly infrastructuralization (van Dijck 2021) —the latter term echoing Platin et al. (2018).[222] All three dynamics proxy, and entrench, a power concentration in the system's trunk, a process she refers to as "trunking the tree". The trunk of the tree constitutes the core of platform power, as they mediate between infrastructures and individual users. While none of these intermediary platforms is essential for all Internet activities, together they form "obligatory passage points" between the roots and the branches (van Dijck 2021, 7). The trunk is largely operated by GAFAM, constituting a self-organized and self-governed core, making the Big Five only dependent on each other in what Van Dijck calls competition-cum-coordination (van Dijck 2021, 9–10), resulting in an oligopoly. By monopolizing and *integrating* one or more layers in the trunk, GAFAM gains considerable control over the ecosystem's connectivity and data flows,

219 The infrastructural systems represented by the **roots** of the tree include material infrastructures and infrastructural hardware like cables, satellites, microchips, datacenters, semi-conductors, speed links, wireless access points, caches, among other things, but also network infrastructures.

The **trunk** of the tree includes several layers either closer to infrastructural services or (sectoral) platform services, evoking the image of the stack, including consumer hardware, almost all of the partner services discussed in this chapter, such as cloud services, identification or login services, pay systems, but also mail and messaging services, social networks, search engines, advertising services and retail networks, app stores, and streaming services, among many other things.

The **branches** represent the sectoral applications). In many societal sectors platformization is taking shape. In practice, we have seen an increasing number of corporate players taking the lead in sectoral data-based services, even if these sectors are predominantly public (e.g. health, education) (van Dijck 2020, 5-7).

220 Vertical integration is a descriptor of the manner in which platformization expands Big Tech control over data flows - effectively privatizing them - by integrating services both from the trunk - where the platforms are located - down towards the infrastructural roots, as well as upwards to the branches where the (public) sectors and sectoral platforms are located (van Dijck 2020, 8).

221 "Cross-sectorization refers to tech companies expanding their influence across sectors, combining the collected behavioral data from multiple sectors (van Dijck 2020, 9).

222 Infrastructuralization signifies how platforms are increasingly moving toward becoming infrastructures (for users).

becoming infrastructures themselves (Plantin et al. 2018).[223] This monopolization is not just shaped through partnerships and ownership but also by technology that extends or permeates platform boundaries.[224] Through a simultaneously centripetal[225] and centrifugal[226] move, Big Tech companies stretch the borders of their software ecology across the entire trunk. Hereby, effectively applying a locked-in logic, similar to that of the walled garden model[227], from the roots – or infrastructures – of the web, to the sectoral branches.

Thus, platformization benefits tech companies when they can align their crucial gatekeeping and monetizing functionalities across infrastructures and sectors, sustaining their proprietary data flows (van Dijck 2021, 13). Big Tech has the unique leverage to control the ecosystem's connectivity by operating more platforms across the tree, integrating them both *horizontally* and *vertically* (van Dijck 2021, 9), not unlike media industries in the 20th century. Tech companies have been building a privatized platform ecology. They own infrastructures on which governments are dependent, provide intermediary services essential for Internet activity – which allows them to prioritize their software and other services -, and offer complete packages of sectoral software and built-on applications – sometimes even on their own hardware and with their own intermediary services like ID's – moving towards a sectoral dependence in many public sectors. This vertical integration may cause user lock-in from the infrastructures to the sectors, thereby obfuscates the boundaries between infrastructures and sectors (van Dijck 2021, 8).

4.3 Deplatformization as platformization

The platform power of Big Tech is not just located in their size or reach, but in their ability to control who stays connected to the core infrastructure of the platform ecology and who is relegated to the margins. In the Gab case, this core or center was embodied by the services and partnerships that were used by several of the GAFAM companies and a range

223 Besides this infrastructuralization of platforms, GAFAM also develops a monopolistic presence in intermediary, infrastructural and sectoral services, including consumer hardware – tied to their own proprietary software –, they also own a vital part of the Web's infrastructure like datacenters and cable systems, a process referred to as the ''platformization of infrastructures" (Plantin et al. 2018).

224 Examples of such technical boundary resources are API's.

225 What I call the *centripetal force of platforms* is the process in which platforms draw users, services, and dataflows within their own borders.

226 What I call the *centrifugal force of platforms* is the process in which major social media companies expand their data capture capabilities outside the platform boundaries (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013; Helmond 2015). A notorious example of expanding the control over data flows outside of the platform, making the open Web 'platform-ready' (Helmond 2015) is 'the pixel'.

227 The term 'walled gardens' refer to closed apps and environments (Holmes 2013). During the 90's and 2000's, fears of user lock-in were articulated as 'Walled Gardens' (Zittrain 2008; Holmes 2013) – which meant forming closed environments that border online activity, users and content, disconnecting them from the open Web.

of smaller services, to push the fringe platform to the periphery. So, major mainstream social media platforms can apply pressure on fringe platforms through their own services, but also through the other infrastructural services they own, and possibly the services they are partnered with or have close relations with and use that platform power to govern the web. These companies use the business relations and technical integrations they acquired as a part of platformization, to push radical free speech off the online, the process I refer to as deplatformization. If the expansion and integration of Big Tech over the whole web is the core of platformization, what then is deplatformization? Should we consider the unravelling of a fringe platform from its platform ecology as the reversal of platformization or a logical progression? I argue that deplatformization is not necessarily the reversal of what platformization is but rather a progression. Big Tech companies disconnecting fringe platform services from its partners in the stem, is a consequence of rule setting power these platform technologies obtained from vertical integration and trunking the tree.

If we see platformization as "the interpenetration of the digital infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life" (Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck 2019, 6) and we accept that deplatformization is the product of a power struggle over the platform ecosystem which stems from an amenity of the ecosystem's hierarchical structure, and not the product of individual actors' enforcing TOU's, then it follows that deplatformization and platformization are two sides of the same coin. First of all, platformization is, in contrast to deplatforming, a condition for deplatformization. It is only because Big Tech obtained the rule-setting power to control who stays at the center of the platform ecology, that deplatformization gets its infrastructural impact. It was due to the ownership of, and partnerships with, infrastructural services, that MsSM platforms were able to deplatform Gab. Also, the logical consequence of the processes of platformization such as vertical integration, cross-sectorization, and infrastructuralization, is that GAFAM companies obtain rule setting power in the online ecosystem. Their economic model will lead them to dominate the online dynamics by acquiring partners, promoting technical integration, inviting, and barring contributors; they become infrastructures and grow platform power in many (public and private) sectors, hence impacting the public debate which they then ought to govern.

Paradoxically, deplatformization also undermines platformization, since the latter thrives best in opacity. Big Tech companies use the notorious in-between status of their platforms to avoid regulation and accountability, thereby consolidating their power. When they do moderate, GAFAM's role in the public sphere and the power they accumulated through platformization gets articulated in the public debate. Suddenly Big Tech and their governing power become more visible and less elusive. This is especially true in the case of a deplatformization debate, which is very controversial form of moderation. It opens the VLOPs platforms up to the critique. In that manner the deplatformization of Gab launches

a 'positioning narrative' that asks whether we should be comfortable with the reach of Big Tech's power on governing the public debate.

5. Conclusion: Deplatformization as analytical moment

In this chapter, I've shown that our online public sphere is platformized, and that the platformized web is hierarchal and interrelated and can be controlled through obtaining a monopoly position in certain layers of the stem of the tree, also called trunking the tree (van Dijck 2021). In this manner, Big Tech companies are able to control the entire platform ecosystem by taking strategic positions, blurring the distinction between infrastructural, intermediary, and sectoral platforms. As we have seen in the case of Gab, MsSM can govern the platformized public sphere by applying gatekeeping and moderation activities beyond their own borders, through technical boundary resources, ownership of intermediary services, and partnering other infrastructuralized technology platforms establishing a competition-cum-coordination.

The framework of platformization is key to understanding how the public sphere increasingly rely on corporate infrastructures. In this chapter I described on platformization as expansive (Helmond 2015), infrastructuralizing (Plantin et al. 2018), and driven by technical and organizational partnerships and services (van der Vlist and Helmond 2021; van der Vlist 2022). What this chapter contributes to those perspectives on platformization is the lens of the fringe and the process of deplatformization. By taking the deplatformization of Gab – a process where the fringe platform was pushed off the web through blocking its access to web infrastructures and by cancelling its business partnerships -, I focused on what platformization means for platforms that contest such hegemony. The deplatformization of Gab reveals the power of privately owned platforms and shows how their reach extends far outside of their walled gardens. It is therefore best understood as a power dynamic in, and consequence of, a platformized public sphere. It exposes a power struggle between mainstream and fringe platforms, and bares the clashing of commercial and public interests which is inherent to the platformization of the web. Additionally, it shows platform power as infrastructural power. The fringe lens incorporates discourse, power dynamics, the marginal, and the democratically deficient in the analysis of the platformized public sphere. It shows the relationship of fringe platforms to mainstream platforms. However, as mentioned in the introduction chapter as well as in the conclusion of Chapter 3, it was the deplatformization of Gab that further calibrated the scope and lens of this research, from analyzing fringe platforms as separate technologies, to the study of fringe platforms as part of the structure and dynamics of the broader platformized public sphere. The microsystem of the platform is intricately intertwined with the larger platform ecosystem.

Moreover, deplatformization cases are analytical moments through which platformization shows itself and can be understood. The contentious nature of radical free speech platforms

reveals, in moments of disturbance, the absence of public or institutional governance, the homogeny of Big Tech over the online, and the depth of the platformization of our online ecology. It is a moment of 'break down' of platformization where GAFAM companies show themselves as governing actors. An example of this, is how deplatformization shows how MSsM platforms can simultaneously be both parts of Gillespie's distinction (Gillespie 2017) between the 'governance of' as 'governance by' platforms, thereby collapsing the binary of governance of platforms and the governance by platforms. This collapse of two strata of governance shows that the ongoing platformization of the web left a government shaped hole that Big Tech filled. We become aware of this during instances of distortion of the opacity of platformization. Deplatforming can be such an instance. Deplatformization most definitely is.

Consequently, an analysis of deplatformization is equally an analysis of platformization, and inversely the concept of deplatformization may prove essential in the future analysis of the internet as a public infrastructure flooded by corporate interests. Platformization has made our online public sphere interdependent, hierarchically organized, and highly incorporate. Tech companies align their crucial gatekeeping and monetizing functionalities across infrastructures and sectors, sustaining their proprietary data flows, but would rather do so without assuming the costly implications of civic governance (van Dijck 2021, 13). While the appropriation – or colonization (Couldry and Mejias 2019) of the web might have been economically motivated, the regulatory power over speech is a by-catch that we need to address, since the consequences of platformization are felt beyond the marketplace and/or consumer rights. The public sphere, or infosphere, Big Tech companies have monopolized, is vital for a functioning democracy (see chapter 6). As a result of the expansionist character of platformization, GAFAM companies stumbled into public services, where they are now forced to govern in the public interest. Understanding how deplatformization works and which mechanisms it entails may hopefully add to a more sustainable concept of internet governability (van Dijck 2021, 19).

In the next chapter I follow Gab's venture further into the periphery of the platformized public sphere, by analyzing how the fringe platform responded to the deplatformization, moving away from the mainstream infrastructures, and attempting to find new web infrastructures in the fringe. Chapter 5 will again be at the meso-level of the platformized public sphere, again taking the fringe lens to understand how the online public sphere is governed, how power runs through its infrastructure, how replatforming relates to platformization, and what the fringe signifies in these processes.

5 Replatforming Gab
Parallel infrastructures and alternative models for democratic participation

1. Introduction

"You have to be willing to build your own parallel internet"[228] wrote Andrew Torba in his blog post 'The Real Big Tech Exodus' (10 January 2022). His incentive for a parallel internet was clear: a platform stands "no chance at challenging Big Tech platforms while being fully dependent and built on top of Big Tech infrastructure". This statement – opportunistic and fueled with alt-right activism – echoes the key observations of the previous chapter, namely that, in order for (fringe) platform services to stay online and function, they need tech partnerships and infrastructural services, which are generally owned by GAFAM or their partners. In a platformized online environment, this reliance can be weaponized by major tech companies to govern (the speech on) platforms that are seemingly independent of them. It would thus take parallel infrastructures and partner services, independent from those that make up the mainstream platformized web, to be truly outside of Big Tech's reach.

After its deplatformization, Gab needed new independent infrastructures to avoid future cancellation or censure. Gab saw three ways of securing such 'parallel' infrastructural services: 1) it could partner with ideologically likeminded platforms or services outside the GAFAM sphere that will not collaborate with deplatformization efforts; 2) it could build these infrastructures itself, and 3) it could use and/or appropriate technology or services not owned and operated by mainstream Big Tech infrastructures, but also not necessarily ideological allies of Gab. This pursuit to replace lost or precarious platform infrastructures, is called replatforming.[229] It evokes several relevant questions that pertain to fringe platforms

228 Torba, Andrew. 'The Real Big Tech Exodus.' Gab News. 10 January 2022. https://news.gab.com/2022/01/10/the-real-big-tech-exodus. Retrieved 21 April 2022.

229 The term 'replatforming', as it pertains to publics, stands for the migration to alternative platforms (Rogers 2020). In the context of the deplatformization, it can mean the migration of platform services to alternative tech partnerships and infrastructural services. In Julia Ebner's essay 'Replatforming unreality' (2019), as well as in Ethan Zuckerman's prelude to the text, 'replatforming' is framed as "the rise of alternate fringe and far-right platforms and an emerging alt-tech world". Currently, I do not see the need to introduce the term 'replatformization'. As opposed to 'deplatformization', which was a concept suggested and defined by Van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer (2021), and which I assume to be a fruitful theoretical lens through which platformization and governance of the platformized public sphere can be

in general, but also to the larger platformized public sphere: what alternative technological infrastructures does the radical free speech fringe develop in order to remain present at the center of the platformized public sphere, and is it successful in establishing them? Do these parallel infrastructures constitute a parallel 'stack' or 'trunk'[230]? And how do these alternative tech infrastructures signify alternative models of online deliberation and democratic participation online? Ultimately, I would argue that our understanding of the significance of the fringe or parallel platform infrastructures, and the fringe/mainstream dynamic of the platformized public sphere, contributes to our understanding of the platformized public sphere as a whole.

This chapter picks up where the last chapter left off, by following Gab's replatforming efforts. I will interpret what replatforming means for the position of the fringe in the platformized public sphere. First, in the next section 'Alt-tech and FLOSS communities', I elaborate on the 'Alt-tech movement'[231] and the other counter tech communities called 'FLOSS', and describe their relation to Big Tech and the fringe, in order for the reader to comprehend the terminology used in the rest of this chapter. In section 5.3 about Gab's new infrastructures, I expound on the three ways in which Gab tries to establish new infrastructures, and decide whether these constitute a separate 'trunk' of the platform ecosystem's tree. Subsequently, in section 5.4 titled 'Competing ideologies make for competing technologies', I argue that the technologies of these alternative tech communities are ideologically driven. In the conclusion, I re-engage with the concept of the platformized public sphere and discuss what the replatforming of the radical free speech fringe as an ecology of services in a platformized public sphere signifies.

2. Alt-tech and FLOSS communities

'Alt-tech' is defined as the sphere of collaborating online far-right platforms, services, and infrastructures, that are created with the aim of decreasing the sphere's dependency on Big Tech companies and their partners, so as to escape their governance. Well-known examples of Alt-tech services are social media Parler and Minds; free speech video platform BitChute; financial services GoyFundMe and WeSearchr; Altpedias[232] such as Metapedia and The En-

analyzed, 'replatforming' is the description of a process, to which I do not wish to extensively add at this moment.

230 Because the metaphor of the trunk is more exemplary of the way in which power resides in the structure of the internet and web, I will use that term. Having said that, parallel fringe infrastructures would also imply a parallel stack.

231 The term Alt-tech has several different spellings. I will use the Wikipedia spelling since no authoritative spelling has been decided on. This is not uncommon for new phenomena. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alt-tech.

232 Alternative encyclopedias that reject Wikipedia's celebrated 'neutral point of view' and create and maintain their own universes of "alternative facts" (de Keulenaar et al. 2019).

cyclopedia Dramatica; domain name registrar and web hosting service Epik; online shops like Redbubble; and white supremacist dating websites called WASP Love and White Singles (Ebner 2019). These platforms "offer a promise of uncensored speech, which exist specifically to give a space for far-right, nationalist, racist, or extremist points of view, and which harbor a broad sense of grievance that speech has been 'censored' for failure to be 'politically correct'"(Zuckerman and Rajendra-Nicolucci 2021). The movement was launched during the second half of the 2010s, when deplatformization efforts left the alt-right in need of new technological infrastructures. Up until then, Alt-tech services *avant la lettre* such as Voat, Gab, Hatreon, and the Chan imageboards were predominantly concerned with housing the deplatformed publics and enabling radical free speech. Now that these spaces themselves were under threat of annulment, the movement became concerned with gaining control over the infrastructural services upon which they, and the rest of the modern web, relied (Hermansson et al. 2020). The alt-right had to become the Alt-tech to guarantee the survival of the new far-right movement (Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg 2019).

Torba expressed the same necessity in a series of posts and blogposts published through the Gab channels, starting as early as August 2017 – so in the slipstream of the *Unite the Right* rally, and a full year before Gab's deplatformization – in which he announced the "Alt-tech revolution" and "Free Speech Tech Alliance".[233] The posts rallied against Silicon Valley and stressed the need for 'alternative' platforms and infrastructure outside the control of Big Tech, and can be interpreted just as much an attempt to spur a narrative of revolution, as a call for collaboration. The announcement did little to solve Gab's infrastructural problems, but it did solidify the concept of 'Alt-tech' as a technological *and ideological* countermovement. In characteristic fashion, Torba thus seemed to have announced the Alt-tech movement into existence. Moreover, it explicated the new strategy and "infrastructural turn" of the alt-right (Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg 2019), while creating an inch of distance between the Alt-tech movement and the 'alt-right' moniker, which was now seen as toxic. Torba thus portrayed the image of a movement or alliance, while it was largely just Gab proclaiming a revolution. Simultaneously, the proclamation broadened the scope of Gab's contention from 'free speech' to the broader 'resistance to Silicon Valley' narrative. Logically, in order for this 'revolution' to be won, building a free speech social media platform would not be enough; Gab needed to build an internet independent of a liberal mainstream.

Although Alt-tech platforms are fringe technologies, not all fringe platforms are Alt-tech. Alt-tech signifies two valid, and by now familiar, debates; (1) about content mod-

233 Gab, "The Free Speech Tech revolution has begun,"medium.com/@getongab, 9 August 2017 https://web.archive.org/web/20180918112907/https:/medium.com/@getongab/announcing-the-alt-tech-alliance-18bebe89c60a & Gab, "Announcing the Free Speech Tech Alliance," medium.com/@getongab, 10 August 2017 https://web.archive.org/web/20180912160403/https:/medium.com/@getongab/the-alt-tech-revolution-has-begun-a5c9d62ae727 & https://web.archive.org/web/20170904125019/https:/gab.ai/AltTech.

eration on the web, and (2) about the concentration of the governing power of a handful of tech companies. Both debates are also key topics for several different communities in the fringe, which capture a wide array of debates and counter perspectives. However, this explanation of the Alt-tech sphere obfuscates how deeply it is rooted in far-right extremist thought, and alt-right activism (Hawley 2018; Trujillo et al. 2020; Rogers 2020; Jasser et al. 2021). Names such as GoyFundMe and Hatreon betray the hateful nature of the services and mimic the trolling of the alt-right. Euphemisms such as 'alternative technology' and 'radical free speech' can conceal this radicalism and far-right ideology. Therefore, I propose that the term Alt-tech should always refer to 'the ecosystem of platform services of the alt-right', emphasizing both the far-right history of the services *and* the "infrastructural turn" of the alt-right (Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg 2019). In doing so, I diverge from the only authoritative categorization of Alt-tech that I know of, namely that of Julia Ebner[234], which focusses more on publics than on infrastructures. I do so because I do not want to coalesce far-right technologies with services that fell prey to alt-right communities. A definition of Alt-tech as 'alt-right technologies' stands in contrast with my terminology of 'fringe platforms'. The latter captures a wide array of different ideologies of the contesting platform services, emphasizing their center-periphery dynamic of the platformized web.

There are other tech communities, besides the Alt-tech, that revolve around a move away from centrally[235] controlled infrastructures. These communities are not only older but also far more successful in creating their own infrastructures. Pioneers of the open-source[236] and decentral[237] internet have long developed internet protocols and built services outside of the control of governments and big corporations. Some of these technologies are still a well-known presence on the Internet, such as the Torrent protocol or email (Hermansson et al. 2020, 148). These communities, which champion free and open software, are known as the FLOSS (Free/Libre and Open Source Software) communities (Strype 2017). FLOSS

234 Ebner distinguishes four different types of Alt-tech, namely 1) far-right services such as Gab; 2) libertarian 'radical free speech' platforms such as Telegram; 3) hijacked platforms such as Discord, and 4) fringe(!) platforms that she describes as outsider platforms that 'serve as engine-rooms for Internet culture' (Ebner 2019, 8) such as the /pol boards of 4chan or 8Chan. I have already touched upon Ebner's definitions and categorization in my theory chapter.

235 'Centrally' here means 'corporately owned' and a top-down governance structure. These stark hierarchies determine the design of the technology. It does not mean that all fringe technology is decentral, or that all corporately owned technology is not.

236 Open-source refers to software of which the source code is public and openly available, so that others can use, study, modify, and distribute it. The founding principle of open-source licensing is to prevent closing off of technology by copyright. In this manner, many people can collaborate and contribute to technology (Perens 1999; Laurent 2004).

237 Decentral technology allows people to share without a central server or a fixed division between sender and receiver; instead, a great number of computers share with each other. Therefore, no computer, server, or person is vital for the entire network. Such a process by default creates more autonomy and privacy.

communities and services compile a significant portion of what I have defined as fringe platforms, specifically those that fight for decentralization of power and revenue.

FLOSS communities have a history of providing free, federated, or decentral alternatives to closed source and proprietary software and the walled gardens of social media. Examples are Wikipedia, web browsers by Mozilla and Netscape, the distributed version control systems of Git, the Linux operating system, and the Apache software. Recent years have seen an intensified strive towards – or a return to – a decentralized internet including efforts to build alternative social media (Mansoux and Roscam Abbing 2020, 125). This is in part because the privatization of the Internet during the second part of the nineties made the web – ever increasingly – lose its publicness and openness (Radu 2019), but also because of an increased awareness of the abuse of personal data by the large mainstream technology platforms over the last decade. Consequently, alternative projects and services relying on some form of decentralization, as well as encryption, have appeared in order to address these issues. Where Big Tech platforms have an allegiance to the business interest of the company, FLOSS and decentral platform technologies' primary focus are the users.

Decentralization is a core value of the FLOSS communities along with *open software* and *interoperability*. We refer to decentral social media services as DOSNs (Decentralized Online Social Networks), and collectively, these DOSNs make up the nodes of a massive social network called the 'fediverse' (La Cava, Greco, and Tagarelli 2021), a contraction of 'federated universe'. The fediverse is a network of independent social media sites whose users can freely connect across different decentral, nonprofit, and self-governed platforms (Kwet 2020). In the fediverse, different servers – or instances – communicate to each other through a protocol. Fediverse services, such as Hubzilla, Peertube, Mastodon[238], Misskey, Pleroma, Diaspora, Peertube, NextCloud, Friendica, Funkwhale, and Pixelfed mostly rely on the Activitypub protocol for interaction between instances (La Cava, Greco, and Tagarelli 2021). Such a decentral web distributes attention, control, and value over the nodes, thereby subverting the business models and logics of all MsSM and Big Tech. The fediverse thus signifies a movement away from the Big Tech model towards smaller but interconnected, free, and open technology, in order to improve user agency of social media infrastructures, at the cost of corporate control (Mansoux and Roscam Abbing 2020, 126). Both the fediverse and FLOSS communities are examples of the fringe.

While the FLOSS fringe is united with the Alt-tech in its opposition to Big Tech, they are also in opposition ideologically, which becomes quite evident when they encounter each other. As we will see in the next section, the ideological principles of openness, decentralization, and interoperability that inform FLOSS technologies, also make them susceptible to

238 With the emergence of Mastodon in 2016, FLOSS ideals became materialized into a widely used social networking technology (relative to other fringe platforms). This was a huge step for the ideal of an alternative – federated – social media ecology (Mansoux and Roscam Abbing 2020, 125).

appropriation or 'forking'[239]. Due to encounters with the alt-right, some FLOSS actors have acknowledged that openness has its limits, technically and culturally (Mansoux and Roscam Abbing 2020, 130) and have made the fediverse diverge from its original (anarchist) assumption that a decentral distribution of governance and ownership would remain feasible on every scale (Mansoux and Roscam Abbing 2020, 129). Thus, even though both fringe communities envision a radical different web and online public sphere as the one currently dominated by Big Tech, they also signify two different alternatives, technologically and ideologically.

3. Gab's new infrastructures

When Gab's deplatformization reached a peak at the tail end of 2018 and GAFAM tech companies and their partners cut most ties to the fringe platform, it needed new partnerships and infrastructural services. In this section, I expound on the three ways in which Gab has tried to establish Alt-tech infrastructures, corresponding to the sections 5.3.1 Partnering, 5.3.2 Building, and 5.3.3 Appropriating'. As we will see in this chapter, all three options have significant limitations. Surprisingly, these limitations not only stem from technological or material deficits but are also often related to ideological characteristics of platform technology and the tech communities from which they sprung. On the one hand, the desire for building their own technologies and partnering with ideological allies causes Gab to align with the Alt-tech movement; on the other hand, the appropriation of (other) fringe technology brought Gab into a conflict with the FLOSS communities that champion free and open software. In the final subsection 'A parallel trunk?', I discuss whether Gab has succeeded in building parallel platform infrastructures outside of the Big Tech trunk of the web. I will explain why this is not the case and what purpose these Alt-tech technologies do serve.

3.1 Partnering

The first way in which Gab tried to break loose from its dependency on mainstream Big Tech is by creating partnerships with fringe 'radical free speech' services. As said, the founding of the Alt-tech movement was predominantly a declaration that Gab would start looking for ideological allies and/or supportive partners. Gab has adopted a series of – increasingly more – fringe services, and this posed several problems. For one, some services were seemingly open to radical free speech communities and services, but not as willing to have a contentious relationship with the mainstream web. Most Internet companies are deeply invested in maintaining good relationships with Big Tech and will terminate their relationships with highly controversial services such as Gab if they imperil this relationship. Since Big Tech had become so central in, and infrastructural for, the platformized web, the

239 This practice will be explained in the next section.

partnerships that were still available to Gab were obscure and dubious. They were often located outside of the western tech sphere, generally had a bad reputation, and sometimes lacked functionality and quality.

Gab has become very secretive about its partnerships, in order to avoid pressure on those infrastructural services, and some of its partners – such as digital security provider Cloudfare – are compliant in that secrecy. What we do know is that, since 2019, Gab has moved its hosting and cloud computing partnerships outside of the mainstream, and has partnered with 'free speech absolutists' such as Cloudfare, Epik, and Sibyl Systems. Additionally, payment technology eCheckProcessing.com and the open-source and self-hosted BTCpay server – which is an extension of the Bitcoin Lightning Network protocol – facilitate the bitcoin transactions on the platform (de Wilde de Ligny 2022), but cannot necessarily be dubbed as free speech abolitionists. Not all of Gabs partners mentioned above are explicitly part of the Alt-tech sphere. Partnering these services is thus not necessarily a move toward an Alt-tech movement, but rather a move towards the fringe.

The major difference with mainstream platforms is the lack of data broker partners, and APIs in general, confirming findings of earlier chapters that Gab has no signs of a data-driven business model. Epik.com is the best example of a service that is an open Alt-tech partner. As mentioned in the previous chapter, when Gab lost all its domain hosting and registration in 2018, it partnered with Epik.[240] This domain registrar and provider subscribes to a radical free speech position and openly defends hosting extremist content on this principle. Contrary to Gab's other lower trunk partners, Epik CEO Robert Monster openly expressed support for the fringe platform, criticized its de-platformization, and declared itself as its "ombudsman" (Martineau 2018; Baker 2018). Epik and Gab also share a radical free speech aesthetic of posturing digital empowerment[241], while in praxis this empowerment means a refusal to respond to hateful and even illegal activity, and a denouncement of any criticism as 'cancel culture', while spewing conspiracy and falsehoods as deflection. Epik has not just hosted Gab, Parler, and Bitchute, but also Infowars, neo-Nazi site the Daily Stormer, and neo-Nazi radio podcast network Radio Wehrwolf. In doing so, it has played an important role in the online infrastructure necessary to keep far-right extremists online, including those that advocate violence (Martineau 2018; Makuch 2019a; Allyn 2021). What makes Epik holdings even more relevant for the Alt-tech sphere is that it owns several other technology companies, that provide different infrastructural services, such as the Sibyl VPS (Virtual Private Server), the BitMitigate CDN (Content Delivery Network), and the

240 The Epik blogpost 'Why Epik welcomed Gab.com' has since been removed, but is archived at https://archive.ph/ACnc1.

241 For example, by juxtaposing quotes of legendary American thinkers such as the founding fathers and Thomas Paine – or inaccurate quotes of George Santayana –, alongside the famous pop cultural adagium of uncle Ben, a fictional character in the spiderman universe; 'with great power comes great responsibility'.

BitMitigate DDOS-protection, as well as the domain privacy (Whois privacy) service called Anonymize. Additionally, Epik is also working on a new cloud utility (Makuch 2019a). This means that Epik has the potential to provide the whole assembly of services the Alt-tech requires to create infrastructures independent from Big Tech.

In summary, the number of services Gab partners with is very limited when compared to mainstream social media platforms. Either Gab is very isolated or hides its partners very well, and this does raise questions whether the fringe platform is viable. Known Alt-tech social media are incorporated into Gab's ecology, and one could interpret that as an alt-right sphere, but in order to solve deplatformization issues, Gab and other Alt-tech SNS need partner services located on the deeper layers of the trunk, especially cloud infrastructure services and financial services or pay systems (van Dijck 2020; 2021). Enter Epik holdings, that aspires to provide these services and evokes the image of a parallel infrastructure that the Alt-tech movement propagates. Having said that, one swallow does not make a summer. Epik is the outlier. It can keep services like Gab online but cannot substitute all the loss in connectivity and networked distribution. There is also the additional demur, that the reliance of a counter tech community on one company is rather precarious, because it would pose such an obvious a pressure point for governance and deplatformization efforts.

3.2 Building

The second way in which Gab tries to resolve its reliance on Big Tech infrastructures is by building its own independent services and infrastructures. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Gab has explored DIY (Do It Yourself) methods of adding to their ecology, such as renting hardware (in an undisclosed data center) and building apps. These 'Gab Apps' are either Alt-tech tools and/or add-ons[242], and although these technologies are relatively of little complexity, they have attracted ample criticism. Some of these apps were advertised but never implemented[243], while others are considered sub-par technology.

The primary example of Gab's own contribution to the broader Alt-tech ecology, instead of an application within its own environment, is the notorious 'free speech web browser' and the 'shadow comment sector' Dissenter (Kaminska 2019). Dissenter is a browser and web application that provides the user with a discussion forum for all the web addresses that are accessed through it. In this manner, the anti-censorship technology attempts to counter the increasing moderation and even disabling of comment sections of newspapers or MsSM

242 The 'Gab Apps' consist of the earlier mentioned *Dissenter*, online shop called *Dissenter Shop* as well as an online marketplace, a news hub, and a blog named *Gab trends* and *Gab News*, a video platform *GabTV*, and finally the pay service *GabPay* (de Wilde de Ligny 2022).

243 An example of this is GabTV (https://tv.gab.com/guide), which was supposed to be an alternative to YouTube but has been delayed and retracted, only to be surpassed by other video platforms and repositories such as Bitchute. Its current form makes it part of Gab's curating and archiving systems instead of anything like a YouTube alternative.

such as YouTube, by laying comment sections on top of the websites (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021). Here Dissenter users can comment on web pages in the superimposed shout boxes where the previous comments made by Dissenter users on the URL are still visible. Notably, because the comment section is decoupled from the underlying content, the website and content owners have no power over this discussion forum as it resides in an overlay outside their control (Rye, Blackburn, and Beverly 2020). The Dissenter app thus allows a user to comment in speech that is forbidden in the underlying URL's own comment section; however, only Dissenter users will be able to speak, and see this speech. So, while this Alt-tech web annotation and augmentation technology functionally compares best to *Google Sidewiki*[244], as a radical free speech fringe technology, it functions as tool for the circumvention of moderation of hateful speech. It is therefore dubbed a tool for "hating on journalists" (Webster 2019).

Initially, in February 2019, Dissenter started as a web browser plugin. Advertised as "the Comment Section of the Internet" it acquired many users fast—nearly 79k (77%) joined in the first month -; however, major browsers Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox banned the comment overlay system from their services and extension stores, two months after its release (Rye, Blackburn, and Beverly 2020; van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021). Because the use of Dissenter requires a Gab profile, by design its users are a subset of the Gab users. The launch of the free speech comment section thus also boosted Gab's user numbers, and similarly the deplatformization of Dissenter impeded that growth, fueling the incentive to get it back online. In 2020, Dissenter came back as a standalone browser, independent from the MsSM and Big Tech, by copying the open-source code of the Brave web browser[245] (Jimenez 2019; Rye, Blackburn, and Beverly 2020; van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021). To integrate the Dissenter browser in Gab's ecosystem, Gab Trends[246] was released, providing a second method to access Dissenter comments. The free speech browser is hence not a standalone service but functions in a manner that places Gab at the center of an Alt-tech sphere. It makes Gab a little bit more 'infrastructural'. As such, Dissenter barely contributed to an Alt-tech ecology, but predominantly to the Gab platform and user-base.

All in all, this is very little proof of Gab building its own (successful) parallel infrastructures. While the software Gab releases obviously follows the Alt-tech ideology of radical free speech and aims at disseminating such speech in/to the Big Tech owned center of the platformized public sphere, it seems that Gab's capacity for developing such software is limited. In all probability, this is due to the investment and expertise necessary for such

244 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_Sidewiki.

245 I will come back to the Brave technology (https://brave.com) and to practice of forking in the next section.

246 The *Gab Trends* app curates news articles on a feed which includes the Dissenter comment threads for each article.

labor. The Gab apps are just minor technologies, often with bad functionality, located on the higher end of the trunk, and therefore they hardly cross the boundaries of the platform successfully. The exception is Dissenter. Here the expertise was initially provided from outside the Gab team by a sympathizing individual (Murphy 2020), although later on, Gab was forced to resort to the tactic of appropriating services, for the sake of countering deplatformization. I argue, though, that even Dissenter is not a true alternative infrastructure. For one, while it does provide a comment section parallel to the regular comment sections, it is invisible to users of the mainstream service. While Dissenter users can still interact *on mainstream content*, they cannot do so *in a mainstream environment*. It is a separate space, on top of a website. An add-on instead of a similar or parallel service. Secondly, Dissenter's affordances, self-positioning, and even publics[247] express the goal of circumventing the governance of content (comments). It should thus come as no surprise that analyses show that the activity on Dissenter is similar to that on other Alt-tech and free speech fringe services, namely hierarchal[248], toxic, right wing, news-orientated, and characteristically often focused on spaces outside of the Dissenter's boundaries (Rye, Blackburn, and Beverly 2020). So, just like Gab itself, the free speech browser is not so much a sphere for discourse or a forum for free speech, but rather functions a space for the peripheral regrouping of fringe publics before infiltrating mainstream space.

3.3 Appropriating

The final tactic through which Gab tries to evade deplatformization is by 'appropriating' existing technology. Appropriation describes the activity of adapting existing technology to other purposes or different use-contexts. While this process is recognizable in consumer culture in general (Jenkins 1992), it has become a distinct aspect of online culture and the use of software-based products (Schäfer 2011). What is radically different from the partnering and building tactics mentioned above, is that appropriating technology is seldom done to ideological allies. As a result, it often leads to conflict with the communities whose technology is appropriated. The tech communities that Gab and the Alt-tech collided with in the process of appropriation, are the earlier described FLOSS communities. When the Alt-tech movement was still just a collection of alt-right publics, they were already known to use and dominate certain social media platforms, as was the case with Discord and Reddit. After the first purges of alt-right publics, decentralized services especially had to deal with these far-right groups in their spaces, because decentral technology grants better protec-

247 Rye, Blackburn and Beverly (2020) suggest that 25% of the users express 'censorship' as their motivation for joining.

248 Although, on Gab, 'super participants' (Graham and Wright 2014) and agenda setters (Zhou et al. 2019) also exist, and platform elites and hierarchies in the attention economy are even worse than in the mainstream (Jasser et al. 2021).

tion to deplatforming. The communities of the decentral services that were invaded by the alt-right publics were all but welcoming, and their owners tried to get rid of these publics.

The *appropriation* of a service[249], however, means that the service is taken and pulled within the Alt-tech ecosystem, not by infiltrating and subsequently dominating the space, but by bringing it within the infrastructure of Gab. Decentral technology remains appealing for Alt-tech platforms, because it can be used to reduce hosting cost, gather funding, and avoid deplatforming of communication and media content through peer-to-peer technology (Bevensee 2020; Hermansson et al. 2020). Of course, the appropriation of platform technology requires that the technology itself is open to appropriation, which effectively means that Alt-tech can only appropriate open-source software. It is for this reason that the technology of FLOSS communities, that advocate an open-source and decentral web, are the usual target of the Alt-tech's appropriation efforts. The Alt-tech does so through a process called 'forking', where one copies – and thus takes for one's own – the available source code of a technology. The FLOSS ideals of open and free software are used against themselves, and entire services are copied and used for purposes opposite to their ideology. I would like to elaborate on this type of appropriation through Gab's two major forks.

The first example of appropriation is the earlier mentioned Dissenter browser. When major web browsers shunned the application, in 2020 Gab decided to make Dissenter a standalone browser by forking the open-source code of the Brave web browser. In this 'fork'[250] Gab kept a few affordances, added a few new ones, and parted with some of its parts. The switch to the Brave codebase ensured the primary goal of a radical free speech comment section outside the grasp of Big Tech and MsSM governance, and also added user control and privacy, in addition to data security over the network. The appropriated Dissenter browser blocks third-party cookies, enables access to Tor,[251] and has the option to block social media connections – for example to Facebook and Google.[252] Additionally, it does not report a distinct user-agent string and avoids being blocked by third-party fingerprinting. The removal of the 'BAT tokens' feature from the browser showed that Gab was not interested in the values of the original technology. BAT tokens, or Basic Attention Tokens, are a cryptocurrency designed to reward users for the attention they give to digital

249 Interesting work on the appropriation of open-source software has been done in the light of participatory culture (Schäfer 2011, 55-76) and other forms of productive collaboration (Rieder and Schäfer 2008, 159-171). In this chapter, the appropriation of software refers to other, uncollaborative types of software production.

250 See https://github.com/gab-ai-inc.

251 Tor conceals the location of a user by redirecting the communications via several locations across the world through a network of relays (Spencer 2021).

252 Dissenter also blocks the ads of the websites and partially protects user privacy, and claims have been made that Dissenter is meant for "cutting off the access to user data and ad revenue for Silicon Valley companies" (Jimenez 2019).

advertisers, and a way through which Brave supports creators (Jimenez 2019). Gab replaced the BAT tokens with a Bitcoin Lightning Network integration,[253] which means that Gab does not subscribe to the alternative distribution of value and wealth the Brave browser embodied.

The Brave community, including its CEO and cofounder Brendan Eich, objected to the forking of Brave by Gab via Twitter.[254] According to Eich, Dissenter added nothing of value to the existing technology, and the fork was thus unnecessary. He also remarked that the Brave ideology was centered around ownership of personal data, and was not meant as a "detached comment system".[255] In response, Torba feigned confusion and stated that "the entire point of open-source is to allow others to build upon an existing codebase", and that "open source projects are forked all the time" (Jimenez 2019). Eich responded that supplementary value is proviso for forking, and added the following comment on Gab's goals and strives; 'Forking is a fine tactic but must serve a larger strategy. Free speech cannot depend on one vendor only.'[256] Eich thus disagrees with Torba's idea that you can just take something for yourself because you need it, that is why he sees this fork as 'parasitic'. I am not an expert in the ethics of forking, however, Eich is right in that Gab does not seem to improve or contribute to the tech community of which it takes. There are no pull requests reported, and the fork did change the core idea of the Brave browser by replacing the BAT tokens with the integration of a Bitcoin Lightning Network. The choices Gab made when forking Brave show that Dissenter was informed by a different core ideology than open-source ethics. Torba all but admitted as much when critiquing the BAT tokens; "For us, building a browser is about access technology. Web browsers were originally built to empower people to access the internet". He also said that "preventing ad fraud, launching 'privacy-friendly' ad networks, and empowering advertisers in general are not things that inspire us or real people outside of BAT holders for that matter." He subsequently stated that he wanted to create a "free-speech browser", and a "free-speech marketplace and app store that is powered by free-speech money, bitcoin,"(Jimenez 2019) suggesting that the Dissenter Browser is also meant to integrate crypto into the Gab ecology.

The disregard for the values of open-source technology by Gab is not an isolated incident, but was replicated in another major fork, which is my second example of appropriation,

253 The Lightning protocol (https://lightning.network/) is a decentralized protocol based on the usage of the blockchain technology of cryptocurrencies. It enables payments in crypto across the users in the network, without putting the transaction itself on the blockchain.

254 See whole thread https://twitter.com/BrendanEich/status/1118689481777766400.

255 "Answer this: what kind of parasite forks an open-source browser to get an extension distributed to people who can already work around silly AppStore bans? Brave is for users who dare to take back control of their data. Some who wants a detached comment system can use Dissenter." https://twitter.com/BrendanEich/status/1118705815127347200.

256 https://twitter.com/BrendanEich/status/1122229658672451584.

namely Gab's conversion from regular centralized web hosting to the Mastodon infrastructure. In doing so, the fringe platform tried to escape its deplatformization. An additional benefit was that the Mastodon app was available through apps stores[257], which would grant users access to Gab users on mobiles (Robertson 2019; van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021, 11). Mastodon.social[258] is a free open-source decentralized social networking and microblogging service similar to Twitter, with – at the time of the fork – over two million Mastodon users[259], and about 500k AMARs[260] (Nicholas 2023). Unlike Twitter, Mastodon is not a single website, but a network of communities operated and governed by different actors through so-called instances. Mastodon is part of the fediverse, so the decentral design of this fringe platform offers the possibility of running 'nodes', and each node can have its own code of conduct, terms of service, privacy options, and moderation policies (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021). Mastodon was launched in 2016, by German founder Eugen Rochko as a response to some of the harassment and censorship problems on Twitter. It saw a surge of new users in 2018 following privacy concerns raised by the #deletefacebook movement (Spencer 2021) and saw another surge in 2022 with the takeover of Twitter by Elon Musk – which had users flee over concerns with radical free speech. To this day Mastodon champions community moderation and protection from abuse.[261] When, in July 2019, Gab tried to rebuild itself on Mastodon's software by forking the open-source code to run its site, Mastodon and many of its user groups were greatly dismayed.

However, it is not straightforward to ban the Gab instance from the Mastodon verse. The technology is made to be forked, and instances are independent by design, so moderation of the Gab instance is impossible. Moreover, the self-government and openness of the technology are corresponding to the FLOSS values, licenses, and protocols (Mansoux and Roscam Abbing 2020). The service did oppose Gab in several ways: Mastodon issued a statement opposing Gab's values,[262] and many servers of the Mastodon ecosystem blacklisted Gab domains so that their communities cannot reach Gab's nodes and cannot interact with the Gab users (Makuch 2019b). Mastodon also paywalled features that are free for other nodes, hoping to diminish every incentive of Gabbers to choose Mastodon as their platform (Zuckerman and Rajendra-Nicolucci 2021). Although Gab experienced opposition from

257 In Chapter 4, I already explained that the Google and Apple app store banned the Gab app.

258 https://joinmastodon.org/.

259 https://twitter.com/joinmastodon/status/1147860542897475584.

260 Average Monthly Active Recipients

261 Mastodon subscribes to several fringe ideas apart from anti-hate speech, like being ad-free and a non-algorithmic content curator. It is self-described as 'by the people for the people' and urges users to take back control. Mastodon comes with effective anti-abuse tools to help users to protect themselves. Thanks to the network's spread out and independent nature, there are more moderators whom users can approach for personal help, and communities with strict codes of conduct. <https://joinmastodon.org/>.

262 https://blog.joinmastodon.org/2019/07/statement-on-gabs-fork-of-mastodon/.

the Mastodon platform and found itself rejected by its communities, this might not have bothered Gab that much. In all probability, the Mastodon fork has little to do with fediverse connections, nor did Gab care to be ideological allies. Seemingly Gab wanted to take charge of its own domain registration and payment processing (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021), as well as better access to mobile phones (Robertson 2019). Again, the Alt-tech is interested in decentral technology, without subscribing to its ideals.

In conclusion, the Alt-tech movement integrates and modifies pre-existing models of interaction that their user base is familiar with and adds new features (Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg 2019) with the aim of avoiding deplatformization and other Big Tech governance. Appropriating open-source and decentral technology does hold some promise for achieving greater independence from GAFAM infrastructures, because it circumvents the lack of resources and ideological allies that were the obstacles for building and partnering Alt-tech technology. FLOSS communities fall victim to appropriation since their technology is both suited for Alt-tech's goals and there for the taking. This is because of the consequence of their pledge to the values of a free and open internet, which are more vulnerable to appropriation than capitalist technologies. The practice of appropriating technology as performed by Gab is only informed by Alt-tech goals and practices, and ignores the principles and practices of the communities it is appropriating from. It is obvious that Gab's stance on speech is not compatible with the values of the Mastodon platform or most of its communities, but a federated organization is compatible with Gab's goals of self-sufficiency and of becoming ungovernable. Similarly, with Dissenter, Gab unapologetically moves away from an alternative reward system of the Brave browser, replacing it with the eyeball logic and steep hierarchies that also inform the mainstream services, just to integrate minor crypto and browser options in the Alt-tech ecology. I argue that the Dissenter browser thus no longer embodies and transmits the same ideology as the Brave browser. The appropriated technology – not the whole service but the coopted instances – are thus no longer part of the community it originated from, and can be considered as Alt-Tech.

3.4 A parallel trunk?

The Alt-tech movement claims to create parallel web infrastructures, independent from those under the influence of Big Tech, in order to guarantee a free and free speech internet. However, the explorations in this chapter suggest that the Alt-tech has been unsuccessful in creating alternative infrastructures, that a fragmentation of the platform ecology and platformized public sphere is not observed, and that 'parallel infrastructures' might not be viable through Gab's tactics. All three ways in which Gab tries to establish an ecosystem of parallel services that may function as web infrastructures, face obstacles the fringe platform seems unable to overcome. While the tactic of appropriation shows promise, it is hindered by constant querulous, or even hostile, relationships with the FLOSS communities it ap-

propriates from. I elaborate on this in the next section. The tactic of manufacturing your own infrastructures is impeded by Gab's limited resources. Gab only managed to build – or partner – small apps and services, mainly focused on self-sufficiency and escaping governance. This lack of resources is also true for most other Alt-tech services that are open to partnerships with a controversial service like Gab. Even Dissenter, the primary example of an Alt-tech service added to the Gab ecology, is – as stated – not an alternative infrastructure, but merely a separate space. To create a parallel trunk, Gab needs high quality partners and infrastructures that provide the hosting, security, cloud and financial services – and preferably even networked distribution to social media service on the higher part of the trunk -, that will not be pressured into discontinuing its relations to the fringe platform. Epik, however, did provide Gab with some services located on the lower part of the trunk, and the future of this partner is currently the only lifeline for the Alt-tech that I see.

Gab's newly acquired services, partners and infrastructures enabled the fringe platform to stay online, boosted its user numbers (Rye, Blackburn, and Beverly 2020), and further integrated its services in a larger sphere. While Gab did not establish separate infrastructures, it did succeed in two other objectives: it avoided deplatformization and established the Alt-tech movement. The presentation of new services is a way to reinforce the Alt-tech narrative and gain legitimacy as a movement, and for that reason, adding to the Alt-tech ecology becomes a means in itself. The Dissenter browser, for example, is celebrated as a success of the movement, and centers Gab as an essential part of an Alt-tech sphere. Currently, the Alt-tech movement consists primarily of Gab and its partner services.[263] Through its 'contributions' to the Alt-tech sphere, Gab is not so much creating parallel web infrastructures, but is rather contributing to its own platform ecosystem. Instead of creating technologies that allow other radical free speech platforms to circumvent deplatformization, or integrate with an Alt-tech sphere, Gab creates technologies that help its 'resilience-building', and forces users to have a Gab account. Resilience-building is defined as 'working toward stability against the perceived threats of censorship' (Wilson and Starbird 2021, 27). In alt-right or radical free speech social media, resilience-building expresses itself as affordances focusing on mobilization, content storage, retrieval, creation and dissemination. In the Alt-tech platform ecology, resilience building is expressed by searching for ways in which partnerships and infrastructural services can no longer be used as governance tools by Big Tech.

Due to the design of the stack – which is layered and hierarchal – and the manner in which Big Tech has platformized the 'trunk' of the web, a 'parallel web' or online infrastructural segmentation is very unlikely, or at least unattainable for ideological outsiders such as counter publics and fringe publics. Competing with Big Tech is also not a likely option. Big Tech is not only technologically and financially superior, but dominant in terms of connectiveness, partnerships, and rule-setting power as well (Hermansson et al. 2020).

263 This is not to say the movement cannot gain momentum and expand to other fringe platforms.

As such, fringe technology can seemingly only serve as a narrative for resistance. Gab's fringe role has, however, come under pressure, as the efforts of replatforming and fencing off deplatformization came at the cost of its connectivity to the mainstream web. As I argue throughout this dissertation, the essence of a fringe platform is its contestation with the mainstream, with which it needs to interact, and thus the fringe cannot be a secluded space. Since most of Alt-tech's efforts were aimed at resilience-building and creating independence from Big Tech, their efforts were not seldomly in contrast with the fringe objectives. I argue that fringe technology cannot be satisfied with avoiding Big Tech governance by taking a peripheral position. Fringe platforms attempt to propel their communities, discourse, and technologies (back) into the middle of the platformized public sphere.

A way to practice resilience-building, while maintaining some of their connectivity, could have been acquired through cooperation with FLOSS communities, however this cooperation did not come to fruition. In the next section, I further analyze how the goals and aspirations of the Alt-tech movement inform their technology, and why these are incompatible with FLOSS communities and the federated web. I focus on how competing ideologies shape platform technology, and what that says about the model for online democratic participation they envision.

4. Competing ideologies make for competing technologies

The infrastructural turn of the alt-right was a way of replatforming the movement, but never progressed beyond resilience building. The Alt-tech are only capable of carving out spaces relatively separate from the mainstream services, and oscillate between the need for connectivity and the need for independence. These are not necessarily incompatible, but the Alt-tech needs either more partners in the lower-trunk, or embrace an alternative technological organization. In the process of replatforming, they encountered other fringe communities that also posed an ideological counter position towards Big Tech. However, building a viable alternative to the corporately dominated ecosystem cannot succeed simply by appropriating open-source technologies and decentralized platform communities, without the values, acceptance, and expertise of those communities (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021). Gab does not subscribe to the open-source and decentralization principles, and FLOSS communities predictably did not want any part of the far-right publics. However, the FLOSS technology is both vulnerable to cooptation, – albeit not powerless – and applicable to Gab's goals of escaping governance. The Alt-tech movement not only appropriates decentral technologies for its purposes (Hermansson et al. 2020) but has also opportunistically adopted parts of the open-source and decentral narrative (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021). Especially Gab's entrance into the fediverse realm can be understood as the progression of 'resilience-building' technology and the mythologization of a counter-tech movement.

Resilience-building could have been established while working with the FLOSS communities, as an opportunity to salvage some of the connectivity Alt-tech has now lost. The fediverse has so far been the most concerted effort to build an online counter-space which stands reasonably apart technically, economically, and ideologically from the GAFAM-nucleus (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021). But even if the promise of a separate sphere is there – and far more viable than the Alt-tech's efforts – Gab does not want to cooperate with FLOSS communities. We saw with the Brave browser that Torba prioritized his wish to control and own a space where radical free speech was possible, over creating or improving a service which could serve as an independent anti-hegemonic technology. This choice has made it less likely that such infrastructures will become a reality. The refusal to cooperate with tech communities beyond its own, leaves Alt-tech capable of interfering with governance only at the application layer. An example of this is Dissenter, which can circumvent moderation of a shoutbox for the group that installs the browser addon, whereas a browser such as Tor addresses censorship and privacy at the protocol level. What ideological proclivity withholds Gab from establishing a separate sphere, and what does this say about the fringe and mainstream dynamic in a platformized public sphere?

An easy explanation of why Alt-tech and FLOSS communities cannot cooperate would be that they are ideologically incompatible. Some parts of the Alt-tech ideology are based on libertarian characteristics – such as 'the don't tread on me'[264] nativist ideology of self-sufficient living -, which at first glance seem compatible to the anarcho-libertarian ideals of the decentralized web. However, the alt-right is actually far more conservative than it is anti-authoritative. For example, the alt-right's illiberalism is hard to unify with ideas of minimum intervention in the private sphere.[265] Rather, the common denominator of Gab's Alt-tech partnerships is a shared allegiance to an absolutist interpretation of free speech (Hermansson et al. 2020) – however superficial and opportunistic[266]. Then what about the left-wing decentral technologies the Alt-tech uses such as crypto currency[267], Bitchute and

264 Referring to the Gadsden flag which was designed during the American Revolution as a symbol of individual rights. Over the past two decades, the symbol has been appropriated by the far-right to signify anti-government attitudes (Sinclair-Chapman 2018).

265 Since maximization of the private sphere would be a classic libertarian goal, it fits awkwardly with the missionary and colonizing urge of the Christian orthodoxy, ethno-nationalism, and patriarchy, which Gab stands for. Seemingly, Gab is not libertarian but Christian nationalist and far-right, and upholds libertarianism as an argument to be left alone, while rejecting any anti-capitalist notion.

266 While Gab and the radical free speech fringe claims, again in libertarian fashion, that public debate is a marketplace where an invisible hand will weed out the best arguments, they are not consistent in their allocation of freedom of censorship. Not permitting – for example – pornography, while allowing for hate speech, is indicative of a more typical conservative, patriarchal, and white supremacist view on free speech, and one could argue therefore not so much radical as reactionary or contra-revolutionary.

267 Cryptocurrency holds the potential to move capital and thus finance with anonymity and a lack of regulation to a level that is unprecedented in centralized finance. It would allow Alt-tech to largely

Telegram? These services have become rather unrecognizable as ideologically left-wing, and are championed by the Alt-tech community not because of the once underlying left-wing ideas, but as a protection against demonetization and de-platformization. Gab has named crypto "free speech money"[268] and alt-right figurehead Richard Spencer has famously claimed that "Bitcoin is the currency of the alt-right"(Humayun 2019). Not all decentral technologies are necessarily – solely – a part of the FLOSS communities, and the presence of open-source and/or decentral technologies in the Alt-tech sphere does not mean these two fringe communities are ideological allies.

While it might be true that the politics of the two different counter tech communities stifles any cooperation, I offer a more (infra)structural explanation of what truly makes decentral – and open-source – technology and Alt-tech incompatible. I argue that a major obstacle for cooperation is that the Alt-tech's criticism of the hegemony in the platformized public sphere is not systemic, where FLOSS's criticisms are. Whereas Alt-tech wants to remove the gatekeepers from the platformized public sphere while keeping the hierarchal structure of the web largely intact, the community of programmers and internet activists that produce – and believe in – open-source and decentral technology aspire not for different gatekeepers, but a radically different internet. The values of openness, publicness, decentral organization, and interoperability corresponds with libertarian and anarchist values, which many early internet pioneers and participants subscribed to. Therefore, open-source and decentral technology is often aimed at abolishing any concentrated point of power (and single point of failure) online, instead allocating responsibilities to user communities who are supposed to govern platforms in compliance with the rule of law (Hermansson et al. 2020). As I already explained, Alt-tech is aimed at radical free speech, the type of free speech that allows for certain types of hate speech while refusing to govern the conversation or its impact, claiming that public debate is a marketplace where an invisible hand will weed out the best arguments. Torba has a clear idea of who is supposed to own that space of radical free speech, namely himself. The Alt-tech movement is manufacturing their own independent platform ecology, thereby taking control into their own hands, but in contrast to FLOSS technology it largely prefers a centralized structure that is no different from how most of their mainstream competitors act as gatekeepers. They are thus not only disinterested in cooperation with left-wing communities, but also in establishing alternative models

escape governance by Big Tech, and establish a feasible business model, which is currently absent, at least from Gab. The Alternative Right and far-right actors have long been interested in this technology. Cryptocurrencies resonate with the cyberlibertarian presence in far-right communities, and an opposition to centralized banking easily evokes the traditional antisemitic trope of banks being controlled by Jews which is still very much alive in the alt-right and far-right spheres (Nekkers 2019; Hermansson et al. 2020; Golumbia 2020).

268 Stated in many blogposts, but most notably in the campaign around Gab's crowdfunding efforts. Also, the primary statement of a Torba podcast contribution (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt17308604/).

to the web; they just want their own infrastructures. Seemingly, the radical free speech fringe has more contra-radical ideals, than radical ones.

Thus, the ideological proclivity of the technology does make for a different type of service, one you could name ideologically radical, but such radicalism does not necessarily make for a radical subversion of technological design. It would be fair to ask whether the Alt-Tech can still be called *fringe*, if it is not subversive of the Big Tech power structures. I would answer that question positively, the Alt-Tech fringe does not truly subscribe to a decentral or open-source ideology.[269] On the contrary, Gab's fringe position manifests itself in relation to a center. Indeed, the myth that the appropriation of FLOSS technology in the Gab sphere propagates is that the Alt-tech movement is a counter-tech movement, comparable to other counter movements while in reality they are a far-right alternative to Big Tech. A meeting between the two fringe tech communities of the Alt-tech and FLOSS absolves the fringe position of the former, by showing how the Alt-Tech maintains the status quo infrastructurally. At the same time, in relation to Big Tech, the radical free speech tech communities are obviously fringe services, since they demystify the facilitating guise of Big Tech and show them to be governing institutions as I explained in the previous chapter.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Gab, and the Alt-tech movement, largely fail to establish parallel web infrastructures to the mainstream, mainly because a lack in investment and expertise, or partner with such capital, prevent them from establishing services on the lower part of the trunk. The exceptions here are Cloudfare and Epik which seem to be the linchpin for alt-right platforms. The Alt-tech is left to mitigate between a loss of connectivity and a vulnerability towards deplatformization. The result is that Alt-tech services secure spaces for peripheral regroupement, and are generally more geared towards countering deplatformization and delivering a narrative of resistance, than towards providing a viable alternative model of the web.

269 I guess this mirrors question on the relation between fascism and (anti-)capitalism. Of course, fascism, old and new, is fundamentally emotive in its goals, deceitful in its communication, and irrational and inconsistent in its thinking on capitalism and economic policy (Romein 1938; Robinson 2019, 170–71). For Romein see https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/rome002soci01_01/rome002soci01_01_0001.php. Mussolini had also propagated to build an 'Italian cooperative state', only to guise his own dictatorship (Salvemini 2020, preface). Yet, the state capitalism of historical fascism is different from the economies of (liberal) capitalist societies and therefore I would argue that fascism is radical to those iterations of capitalism, but also not anti-capitalist as left-wing ideologies can be. In the same way I would argue that the Alt-tech, such as Gab, is a radical counternarrative and tech community, whose core ideology is far-right reactionary and not anti-capitalist. Therefore, it altogether rejects radical left-wing adjustments to platform capitalism, and similarly, progressive identarian politics of Big Tech, as well as its guardianship.

The practice of appropriation of fringe communities – a practice that is deeply inscribed in early internet culture but is now performed by those who do not subscribe to that culture[270] – shows how the radical speech fringe is at odds with other radical technology alternatives. Creating alternative infrastructures is per definition an ideological process. Technology, and media technologies in particular, are not neutral but carry within them the business models, modes of governance, logics of use, ideology of the publics, and so forth. Fringe technology poses an ideological counter position towards a hegemonic center. These observations emphasize the importance of both technological and ideological elements in platform technology, and especially in fringe or counter tech. Likewise, the exploration of fringe visions on the platformized public sphere – as opposed to the mainstream visions of Big Tech and its platformization logics -, starts a conversation not only on alternative – radical – platform infrastructures, but also on alternative models of online deliberation and democratic participation. The absence of alternative web infrastructures means that there are few public spheres outside of the logics of Big Tech, or rather that in our public sphere not much is *public*. I will come back to this in the conclusion chapter.

Deplatformization was never a move away from platformization, but rather an extension and logical consequence of it. Deplatformization only became possible due to the rule setting power Big Tech was granted through platformization. Replatforming then stands for an attempt to move away from – or beyond – platformization, by establishing alternative models of the platform ecology and platformized public sphere. Moreover, similar to deplatformization, replatforming breaks the relative opaqueness of platformization. The provision of alternatives reveals the media structures to be among many, and consequently the Big Tech models are now also perceived as such, a model among other possible models. Therefore, the process of replatforming is part of the fringe lens because it provides analytical moments through which platformization can be studied, as have I done in this chapter. This chapter has shown visions of alternative web infrastructures, and alternative public spheres. It shows us how they are captured in media and platform technology. In the conclusion chapter, I elaborate on the platformization of the public sphere, and the role of the fringe

270 Instead of fans or dedicated users appropriating corporate technology, we see how fringe cultures appropriate technology that has been developed within the communities of expert users who were advocating for open-source, open technology, legal re-use and appropriation; the very user groups who formulated counter tech and counternarratives against Big Tech. The appropriation of corporate technology was painted in optimistic frames that encapsulated the power of the internet and bottom-up collective thinking to these communities (Jenkins and Deuze 2008). The type of appropriation described in this chapter, in these times, evokes frames of a rising far-right, and a monopolized platformized public sphere. If *Bastard Culture* (Schäfer 2011) looks at how FLOSS communities or participatory culture became commercialized, this chapter shows that participatory culture can also express itself in illiberal and far-right infrastructures.

in a platformized public sphere. I argue that technological pluralism could address current monopolies and the loss of publicness.

6 | Conclusion
The public sphere and its problems

> "In the communication and social sciences, it is now commonplace to speak of disrupted public spheres that have become detached from the journalistically institutionalised public sphere. But scholarly observers would be mistaken to conclude that the description of these symptomatic phenomena should be separated from questions of democratic theory altogether. After all, communication in independent semi-public spheres is itself by no means depoliticised; and even where that is the case, the formative power of this communication for the world view of those involved is not apolitical." (Habermas 2022, 167).

1. Introduction

In this dissertation, I have studied the phenomenon of fringe platforms to analyze and understand these emerging alternative radical platforms, the dynamic they engage in with the mainstream platforms and Big Tech companies, and what this dynamic tells us about the contemporary public sphere. I posed the following research questions: *What is the role of fringe social media platforms in a platformized public sphere? What hierarchies and shifts in power do they signify? And how can they inform us about the platform ecosystem?* In pursuit of answers to these questions, I focused on the disruptive fringes of the platform ecology, with the radical free speech fringe platform Gab as a case study. My research has investigated firstly what fringe platforms can tell us about the transformation of our spaces of communication and information into a platformized organization, and secondly, how this transformation has rearranged the relationship between media, citizens, state, and capital within this platformized public sphere. My central claim is that fringe platforms formulate a resistance to the shifting hierarchies of power and to change in gatekeepers online, and more generally towards the ways in which the web is governed by Big Tech corporations. Thus, I study the 'fringe' as a symptom of the platformization of our public sphere, instead of as a mere actor in this sphere.

I have studied the fringe platform Gab through three specific case studies. In Chapter 3, I studied Gab at the micro-level of the platform, analyzing it as a service and ecosystem in its own. Contrastingly, in Chapters 4 and 5, I studied Gab at the meso-level of the platformized public sphere, zooming out and analyzing it as a node of a larger ecosystem of platform

services. In this concluding chapter, I will zoom out once more and interpret the results of my three case studies, against the backdrop of the larger public sphere. The public sphere, here, refers not just to the cumulation of spaces of information and deliberation where civil society communicates its ideas to the decision makers in the societal institutions of the state (Castells 2008, 78), but also refers to the (academic) concept through which western democracies voice their democratic ideals. My case studies contribute to the understanding of both our actual (online) public sphere and to the concept itself.

By studying Gab on different levels, this dissertation has sought to: 1) Describe and analyze fringe platforms as new actors in the platform ecology; 2) Interpret what the contestation between the fringe and mainstream signifies for our spaces of deliberation and information, and 3) Investigate what the platformization of our communication and information channels and their infrastructures mean for public deliberation and participation online. These aims all seek to make *substantive contributions* concerning my object of analysis: (fringe) platforms and the platformized public sphere. Additionally, my analyses can be seen as *methodological contributions* to the study of (fringe) platforms and the platformized public sphere and the field of platform studies. Finally, a third type of contribution I have made pertains to the improvement of our contemporary public sphere.

This chapter is structured around the three major concepts of this dissertation: fringe platforms, platformization, and the public sphere – captured in three sections. Section 2 contains my main conclusions on Gab and the fringe, and answers the questions: What are fringe platforms; How do they function?; What is their role in the platformized public sphere? In this section, I also discuss the terminology of the fringe as a lens for studying platforms, platformization, and the platformized public sphere. I ask what the implications are for the analytical model I have used throughout this dissertation. In section 3 of this chapter, I explain what this research and the fringe lens add to the understanding of platformization by answering the questions: What do fringe platforms signify?; What does Gab's deplatformization and replatforming efforts mean for the position of the fringe in the platformized public sphere? So, again, I pair methodological contributions with substantive contributions. In section 4, I discuss what this research adds to the understanding of the public sphere. Additionally, I discuss how the (bourgeois) public sphere as a concept is a good descriptor and prescriptor for our contemporary spaces of information and deliberation. In all sections, there is thus a constant back and forth between 1) the results of the analysis or the *substantive contributions, 2)* reflection and suggestions on the concepts and methodology of the research or *methodological contributions*, and 3) normative assertions on how our contemporary public sphere functions and suggestions to make it function more democratically beneficial.

The platformized public sphere is characterized by, and expressive of, a process of platformization. This means that, not only are platforms prevalent in the public sphere, but the platform is the dominant organization of the online public sphere. Moreover, as I

have explained throughout this dissertation, with platformization comes privatization and monopoly building, traits that are opposite to a democratically functioning public sphere. The Habermas quote at the beginning of this chapter emphasizes how important it is that public sphere scholarship sees itself as equally concerned with actual democracy as with theory on communication and technology. Since I wholeheartedly agree with this assertion, my normative recommendations in the final section pertain not just to potential future research (5.1), but also to the analysis (5.2) and the improvement (5.3) of the quality of the public sphere. Here, I outline ways to improve the democratic potential of the platformized public sphere through the provision of public and non-corporate alternatives to Big Tech web infrastructures and services, while also proposing a new lens through which to study the public sphere. The goal of these suggestions is to reclaim the *publicness* of the public sphere, as well as to center research on the public sphere around such *publicness*. In doing so, I aspire not just to improve the study of the public sphere, but also to contribute to the public sphere itself.

2. Fringe platforms and the fringe

2.1 Fringe platforms

From the very onset, Gab has been a focal point of controversy, most of the time due to the fringe platform's alt-right sympathies, lackluster moderation, and a high tolerance of antisemitism, far-right influencers, and the celebration of violence. A continuous struggle between Gab and the mainstream platforms ensued in which the latter tried to distance themselves from Gab, due to the public outrage the fringe platform often deliberately provoked. Consequently, Gab was pushed away from the mainstream, towards the anonymity of the dark corners of the web. As my second case study showed, this push involved taking away the multiple services and infrastructures that keep Gab online, connected, and profitable. The continuous conflict turned it into a social media ghetto that failed as a service. Conversely, the contention with the Big Tech platforms proved to be instrumental in Gab's ideological positioning.

This leads to the first major conclusion of this dissertation: Gab is – and should be studied as – a fringe platform; and fringe platforms are best understood and explained through their contentious dynamic with mainstream tech. The analysis of my first case study showed that Gab – and fringe platforms in general – are understood only partially when studied as a platform technology. Instead of analyzing Gab as an alternative to mainstream services, the perspective of a fringe/mainstream dynamic, based on a technology of contestation towards MsSM platforms and Big Tech, proved far more explanatory. For in the process of contestation, Gab has acquired meaning as a referent of resistance. This contention is the 'role' of fringe platforms in the platformized public sphere. When studied separately from

its hegemonic opponent, an analysis of Gab reduces the fringe platform to a reprehensible entity or a failing alternative platform technology. However, when studied through the fringe lens[271], it is succeeding as a materialized rhetoric of contention.

The second conclusion of this dissertation is that different counter tech communities and fringe technologies interact with the dominant corporate mainstream in similar and different ways. Although fringe technology is defined by its ideological counter position towards a hegemonic center, it consists of a diverse group of platforms with diverse oppositions towards the mainstream, stemming from different – and frequently opposite – ideological and political positions.[272] Gab belongs to the radical free speech cluster and is part of the Alt-tech movement[273], and is therefore submerged in the far-right. As shown in Chapter 5, through the Alt-tech movement, Gab discursively transitioned from a predominantly radical free speech and alt-right narrative to an alternative tech and/or anti-Big Tech narrative, but the central trope in Gab's self-narrative has remained that it is a *platform for the deplatformed*.[274] Per definition, a counter position vis-à-vis the Big Tech hegemony equals ideological contestation, but not all such contestation is alike, nor are fringe platforms necessarily radical in the same way. For example, the decentral fringe platforms of the fediverse are radical in the sense that they believe that the governance and ownership structures, as well as the business models of the contemporary platformized web, should not be centralized. Likewise, the FLOSS communities believe that software should be openly accessible and free. These critiques are structural. Inversely, Gab is ideologically radical but not necessarily adverse to the power structures, top-down governance, and business and ownership models of the platformized public sphere. It aims to replace the current eye of the pyramid with its own. This clash of ideologies was best shown in Chapter 5 where Gab's practice of replatforming through appropriation, leads to conflict between the fringe communities. While the open-source fringe and the radical free speech fringe share a contentious position to the dominant mainstream, they are far from ideological allies.

The third conclusion of this dissertation is that fringe social media platforms represent alternative models for participation and deliberation. Platform technologies are not neutral but carry within them the business models, modes of governance, logics of use, politics

271 The fringe lens studies platforms, platformization, and/or the platformized public sphere through its radical margins, as relational and dynamic, focusing on power, breakdown, and discourse. I come back to the fringe lens in Section 6.2.2.

272 Even within the group of fringe platforms that concern themselves with free speech such as Gab, the fringe platforms differ in goals, critique, and ideology, and sometimes they are even in opposition to each other.

273 As stated in Chapter 5, the Alt-tech movement is the infrastructural progression of the alt-right (Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg 2019) to performing resilience building (Wilson and Starbird 2021).

274 This suggestion confirmed the findings of the first case study that the self-narrative of free speech was a way through which Gab could express its 'true identity', that of antagonism.

and identities of the publics and so forth, that is, a larger ideological framework. Chapters 4 and 5 have revealed, not just the organization of the platformized public sphere, the ways in which it is governed, and platform power resides in partnerships, infrastructures and vertical integration over the platform ecology, but also more generally the ideological nature of technology. This is true at the level of the service itself, but also at the level of the ecosystem, thus including partnerships, infrastructures, APIs, and other complementing services. Therefore, when a platform technology builds spaces for information and deliberation, it builds a public sphere and a model for democratic participation based on its ideological framework. Similarly, when fringe and counter tech communities aim to assemble entire alternative web infrastructures to subvert and contest Big Tech models of the web, this is an ideological process. I argue that the compilation of alternative platform technologies and spheres by fringe communities, represents a strive for alternative models of online publicness and democratic deliberation. For this reason, the fringe technology of Gab and the Alt-tech, which is rooted in far-right politics and ideology, is incongruous with the open-source or decentral fringe, which is often left-wing and/or libertarian. The political and ideological frameworks of platforms thus have the potential to uncover the dynamics of fringe platforms, but – I argue – also the process of platformization, and therefore the platformized public sphere.

So, what are fringe platforms? Fringe platforms are both a symptom of, and resistance to, the ongoing platformization of the public sphere, and a renegotiation of the power that Big Tech acquired over the platformized web. They signify a materialized rhetoric of contention towards ownership, business models, or in the case of Gab governance praxis, and other logics of Big Tech companies and the process of platformization itself. Through their presence they formulate the legitimate critique that our current platformized public sphere is democratically deficient, overdetermined and monopolized by Big Tech, and not 'public' enough. The variety of fringe platforms exemplifies the types of critiques, as said, some anti-capitalist or left-wing, others reactionary, libertarian or far-right, but the overarching contention towards a dominant center is shared.

2.2 The fringe as a lens

Fringe platforms should be studied as nodes in a larger ecosystem of services, through their dynamic or contentious relation with the mainstream. Interestingly, the opposite is also true, any analysis of the platformized public sphere should include its fringes, or, should be performed *through* its fringes. Therefore, this dissertation has studied the platformized public sphere by *looking at its margins*. These margins include the illiberal and toxic, the marginal, the anti-hegemonic or countercultural, in the theorization of the public sphere. Normally such actors are considered outside the scope of the bourgeois public sphere and are omitted per vice from its democratic values, or obfuscated by the unitary and consensual character of Habermas' concept of the public sphere. Simply put, those that are disruptive of

the rational critical debate, that are not democratically beneficial, or do not comply with the idealized version of the public sphere, are placed outside public sphere theory. In contrast, I have argued that these actors are essential in describing and theorizing the public sphere and that a fringe lens does capture such actors.

However, the application of the fringe as a lens is more profound than simply including new – disruptive – actors. It does not just enlarge the object of our analytical framework for social media platforms and the public sphere, but revises the model itself. In Chapter 3, I applied the analytical model of José van Dijck's (2013) *The Culture of Connectivity* – henceforth called the CoC model – to the Gab social media platform. Subsequently, I made additions and modifications to the CoC model, so that it would be able to capture fringe platforms. Finally, I decided that the CoC model needed more than a revision of its elements, it needed a different scope. For that reason, I changed my analytical model to that of the fringe lens, through which I was enabled to adequately capture the fundamental elements of both fringe platforms and the platformized public sphere, which had not been possible in the old model.[275] In Chapters 4 and 5, I used the lens of the fringe as my analytical lens. In my research, the terminology of the fringe has thus forced a change in how I studied social media platforms and the platformized public sphere, and I argue the application of the fringe lens can do the same for future research within platform studies as well. I elaborate on each of my alterations to the CoC model, and its conversion to the fringe lens, below.

The first amendment that the fringe as a lens for the study of platform technology enables, is that I could include a platform's discourse, narrative, and self-positioning as analytical dimensions. The original CoC model did not include the analysis of narratives or discourse, although this is an important characteristic of fringe platforms – and possibly of platforms in general. Additionally, the concepts and definitions I use to in this dissertation catechize about discursive elements of technology. Both the definition of platformization[276] and the *perspective of the social media dispositive* (Schäfer 2011; Zajc 2015) *explicitly mention the discursive as part of the analysis*. For this reason, I included the study of a platform's self-positioning narrative as part of the fringe lens.

275 In Chapter 3, the *Culture of Connectivity* model helped to unravel the dynamics of single platforms as 'microsystems' but has not been further developed to explain how single platforms can be considered part of the (macro) ecosystem of platforms constituting the larger public sphere. Because the CoC model limits itself to one service, the focus is on the platform as an ecosystem, instead of the platform as a part of a larger structure and ecosystem. The CoC model was therefore replaced by the analytical lens of the fringe.

276 I subscribed to the definition of (Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck 2019, 5-6) which consists of two parts, "the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life" and the "reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms".

Importantly, I also changed the focus from single services to a platform ecology, including its infrastructures, partnerships, and power dynamics, which is the second shift brought about by the fringe lens. The deplatformization of Gab, and my study of that event in Chapters 4 and 5, showed the infrastructural context and power dynamics of the global platform ecosystem. These power dynamics, infrastructures, and partnerships were not fully captured by the old analytical model, because the latter focused on the micro-level of the platform as a service and ecosystem, instead of on the platform as part of a larger platform ecology, a fringe/mainstream dynamic, and the platformized public sphere.[277] Media – and definitely platform media – are "about environments and infrastructures as much as it is about messages and content" (Peters 2015, 4). Deplatformization and replatforming efforts brought into focus that the study of platform media should include its infrastructures, and its relation to other platforms of the ecosystem. But also, that the study of the platformization of our public sphere and the study of fringe platforms are intrinsically connected.[278] For this reason, I have adjusted the analytical lens towards this relational dimension and the question: How do platforms perform as part of a wider, infrastructural ecosystem of platforms?

Finally, the lens of the fringe focuses on contention, conflict, and breakdown. Cases of deplatformization[279] – and I would argue that the concept of replatforming[280] holds a similar promise – are analytical moments through which platformization can be studied. The contentious nature of the fringe brings forth moments of disturbance, through which we behold the hegemony of Big Tech over the online, the pervasiveness of the platformization of our online ecology, and the absence of public or institutional governance. We become aware of the power of platforms, the ways in which platform power functions, and the fact that GAFAM companies are effectively the governing institutions online. The consensus is

277 To be clear, the CoC model communicated explicitly that a platform was part of a larger ecosystem of services, but it limited its analyses at the borders of a single platform service.

278 In Chapter 3, the *Culture of Connectivity* model helped to unravel the dynamics of single platforms as 'microsystems' but it has not been further developed to explain how single platforms can be considered part of the (macro) ecosystem of platforms constituting the larger public sphere. Because the CoC model limits itself to one service, the focus is on the platform as an ecosystem, instead of on the platform as part of a larger structure and ecosystem. The CoC model was therefore replaced by the analytical lens of the fringe.

279 Deplatformization is defined as an implied governance strategy by Big Tech companies and its partners and a systemic effort to push back encroaching radical right-wing platforms to the fringes of the ecosystem by denying them the infrastructural services needed to function online (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021).

280 As said before, I do not see any methodological benefits to rephrase replatforming as 'replatformization', for now. Having said that, further theorization of the distinction between 'going against deplatformization' and 'going beyond platformization' might result in a use for the term replatformization.

disrupted, the invisible made visible, the hegemonic challenged, and therefore the mythical demystified.

In summary, the fringe perspective is a lens which incorporates structure and infrastructures, dynamics and contention, discourse and technology, political economy and democratic theory, and the marginal as well as the powerful. Through the lens of the fringe, I have studied not just fringe platforms, but also Big Tech as a governing institution, the process of platformization, and the public sphere. Additionally, many of the questions about platform moderation and social media and the public sphere are captured through the dynamics of the fringe. In the same manner in which populism is not the exception to, or perversion of, democracy, but rather an overt version of the same structure of politics and therefore "the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such" (Laclau 2005, 67), fringe platforms can teach us about the nature of platformization and the platformized public sphere, as such.

3. Platformization

3.1 Platformization ≠ plural, public, or free.

The imagination of the Web 2.0 of the early 2000s, which framed social media platforms as emerging public spheres, brimming with an emancipatory potential of participatory culture[281], and therefore making citizens out of users (Uricchio 2004), was overly optimistic in hindsight (Schäfer 2011, 39). Presumed to be countercultural, emancipatory, liberal or even left-wing, the new media of the internet were heralded as providing alternatives to mass media with greater potential for democracy and the self-formation of democratic subjects (Turner 2006). This did not happen, rather the "lava of this at once anti-authoritarian and egalitarian potential, which was still discernible in the Californian founding spirit of the early years, soon solidified in Silicon Valley into the libertarian grimace of world-dominating digital corporations" (Habermas 2022, 159-160). During the political and economic climate of the twenty-first century, tech companies built private platform infrastructures, which could compete with those of the government. Big Tech accumulated unimaginable wealth, scale and power, when entire public sectors became dependent on their corporate infrastructures (Napoli 2019; Hill 2020; van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021). Dreams of a vigorous democratic public sphere, thus resulted in a platformized public sphere where our public spaces are now privately owned, and "largely governed by the commercial incentives of private actors, rather than the collective good of the broader society" (Owen 2019).

281 Participatory culture is a complex discourse consisting of, among other things, a "cultural critique demanding configuration of power relations", as well as "socio-political dynamics related to using the technologies" (Schäfer 2011, 14). It applies a framework of users and counter cultural tech communities that renegotiate power dynamics with and against Big Tech.

As stated in the previous section, fringe platforms are both a symptom of, and resistance to, the ongoing platformization of the public sphere, and a renegotiation of the acquired platform power of Big Tech platforms over the platformized web. Fringe platforms signify contention towards Big Tech companies and therefore to the process of platformization itself. In Chapter 4, I defined platformization as expansive (Helmond 2015), infrastructuralizing (Plantin et al. 2018), and driven by technical and organizational partnerships and services (van der Vlist 2022), and the platformized web as hierarchal, interrelated, and asymmetrical, that can be controlled by obtaining a monopoly position in certain layers of the stem or trunk (van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021). Further conclusions on the nature of platformization have arisen from my application of the lens of the fringe on the platformized public sphere.

First, platformization is a form of technological enclosure of services, users, and public sectors. Platforms grow their software ecologies through a combination of centripetal and centrifugal forces[282], by integrating numerous partnerships, contributors, and "technical boundary resources" such as API's and SDK's (van der Vlist and Helmond 2021; van der Vlist 2022). While the Web 2.0 was meant to counter last millennium's fears of user lock-in, Big Tech has instead "trunked the tree" (van Dijck 2021), laying its walled garden along the trunk of the entire web, enclosing users, services, and data flows (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013; Langlois and Elmer 2013; Helmond 2015; Plantin et al. 2018; van Dijck 2021). I argue that the study of platformization should account for this enclosure of common spaces and public sectors through partnerships and software integrations, which are a driving force behind strategic and infrastructural platform power, and in the context of the platformized public sphere the main reason major social media platforms can apply gatekeeping and moderation activities beyond their own borders. The study of fringe platforms is valuable for detailing this technological enclosure, because fringe platforms attempt to resist it, and/or to provide services that refrain from such enclosure. Through this resistance, the extent of this technological enclosure, but also the governing power that comes with it, becomes visible.

My second conclusion on the nature of platformization is that it can be understood as privatization [283] and the loss of publicness. As I have mentioned in several chapters, most prominently in Chapter 5, the early web was built on – and carried in it – ideals of openness, decentralization and "relative independence from the economic logics of private owner-

282 As explained in Chapter 4, in Footnotes 225 and 226, the *centripetal force of platforms* is the process in which platforms draw users, services, and dataflows within their own borders, and the *centrifugal force of platforms* is the process in which major social media companies expand their data capture capabilities outside the platform boundaries (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013; Helmond 2015).

283 The definition of privatization this dissertation subscribes to is "a transfer in control and/or ownership of business and industry from the public realm to the private" (Mansfield 2007, 393).

ship" (Plantin et al. 2018, 302). This lack of boundaries, both in terms of law and institutions, was technically defined and enforced. Plantin (2018) argues that the logics of such a public internet was due to a larger infrastructural ideal. When the Internet moved from the American military and universities to the public it eventually became a commercial space. Generally, privatization was joined by deregulation and fragmentation. A major deregulating measure took place in 1995 when the American government retreated as regulatory body of the world wide web, effectively privatizing the internet (Leiner et al. 2000). Twenty plus years later, societal and public sectors have become dependent on private infrastructures, while the state and civil society have a decreasing influence over the architecture and governance of the web (van Dijck 2021, 12). In summary, the web has only been privatized fairly recently, and within a few decades it has become platformized.

My use of the fringe lens, as suggested in Chapter 3, shows that the concept of governance is infused with power relations and is justified by political rationality (Lemke 2002). We should thus be aware of the specific ideological framework in which privatization has become possible, namely the elusive neoliberalism.[284] Historically and practically, this political and economic ideology has imposed itself as privatization (Villacañas de Castro 2020). The origin and influence of neoliberalism has recently become the topic of extensive scholarly and journalistic efforts (Mirowski and Plehwe 2015; Mellink and Oudenampsen 2022). It is a sign of our times that the pervasiveness of neoliberal politics is hard to overlook. I argue that it has specific logics and justifications that are similar to those underlying the governance of our platformized public sphere. As said in Chapter 3, there is a political rationality underpinning the "modes of thought" (Lemke 2002) on which the praxis of governing is justified. Platform governance in particular, assumes a projected use subject to an ideology, which is coded into technology, procedures, and praxis. However, in Chapters 3 and 4, the governing praxis of platforms is shown as inconsistent and purposefully vague in its legitimation. Platforms as governing actors resent having to act, and also dislike the costly implications that come with civic governance (van Dijck 2021, 13); therefore, they prefer to hide behind a facilitating role, posing as an infrastructure, pretending they are not there.

What is glaringly present from my analyses, are the economic logics of platformization, fueled by expansion through partnerships, that shape our (online) public utilities and infrastructure, and harbors our public sectors. Ostensibly, the political rationality is replaced

284 Neoliberalism has known a plurality of political practices and philosophical theories (Mirowski and Plehwe 2015). Originating between the 1920s and 1950s, this political philosophy laid dormant while marching through the institutions for fifty years, and rose to prominence in the 1980s and 90s. One might think of Friedrich Hayek, Ayn Rand, and Milton Friedman as famous neoliberal thinkers, but Ludwig von Mises, Willem Ropke, and Walter Lippman are just as important (Mellink and Oudenampsen 2022). Similar to liberalism, neoliberalism believes in free markets and individual freedom, but unlike liberalism it sees a role for the state to create and maintain markets (Mellink and Oudenampsen 2022, 9).

by an economic – neoliberal – one. Harm reduction through mechanisms of management and administration, automatically classifying content on the basis of systems designed for liability avoidance (copyright) and functionality and user experience (spam), fits the logics of advertiser's appraisement. The entanglement of business models and governance goes beyond MsSM platforms governing strategies, but is also (increasingly) inscribed in the design of ecosystem, and grant Big Tech its rule-setting power (Castells et al. 2009). The 'ideological proclivity' of the governing institution at the mesolevel of the platformized public sphere is based in neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism, coincidentally, is also an ideology that disguises itself as pragmatism and as unideological, or tries to convince us – mimicking the devil's artifice[285] – that it does not exist while simultaneously posing as an economic pensée unique[286] (Mirowski and Plehwe 2015). This corresponds to my assertion that platformization is a hegemonic process, it monopolizes and infrastructuralizes the web's layers, manufactures consensus, and obfuscates both its own presence and alternative models of the web. Platformization, but also deplatformization as governing praxis, are logical extensions of an economic mode of thought. Accordingly, Gab's frame of 'economic participation as an act of resistance', is rather appropriate. Similarly, Gab's resistance by disruption of the invisibility of Big Tech as a governing institution, is amply explained through this logic. The conclusion that platformization is to be understood as privatization and the loss of publicness, should thus be accompanied by the assertion that the governance of the platformized public sphere is underpinned by a political rationality that is congruent to the economic ideology of neoliberalism.

Thirdly, platformization signifies a lack in diversity and a lack of plurality of platform technology. Platformization causes Big Tech to horde users within a limited number of services, all rooted in the same private logics and Silicon Valley ideology, under the same oligopolistic ownership, with similar governmentality, and business models. This means that platformization is thus antithetical to fragmentation. Fragmentation is normally considered an element of privatization, due to the scattering of responsibility over public services among an indefinite amount of privately owned pigeonholes. Yet the privatization of the online public sphere took form as the opposite of fragmentation, namely centralization through monopoly building. The contestation of the fringe usually makes this centralization explicit in its critiques. What is more, this characteristic of platformization became especially apparent through the study of how the fringe attempts to counter platformization. It becomes clear that to oppose platformization would mean a fragmentation of the platformized public

285 Or Thom Yorke's plea on 'How to disappear completely'.

286 A concept translated as (economic) 'single mindedness'. It refers to the proposition or strong shared belief among the influential that a – in this case economic - problem only has one solution, most famously captured as 'TINA'.

sphere over a plurality of infrastructurally independent services, which I call technological pluralism.[287] In Chapter 5, I show how the Alt-tech movement tries – and fails[288] – to establish parallel infrastructures as an alternative to the Big Tech web infrastructures. This can be considered a move to subvert platformization. However, these replatforming[289] efforts were primarily aimed at avoiding moderation and censorship or "resilience-building" (Wilson and Starbird 2021), and did not provide infrastructural services necessary for technological pluralism; rather they contributed to the Alt-tech's own platform ecology with services higher up the trunk. As concluded in Chapter 5, online infrastructural segmentation is currently in all likelihood unattainable for the radical free speech fringe sphere, due to the layered and hierarchical design of the stack.

Finally, platformization can be characterized as not just a monopoly building process, but also as a hegemonic process. For the longest time, social media platforms have claimed to facilitate participation, while their own structure and influence fade in the background,[290] and academics have championed both the internet and social media as participatory. This discourse, and these images of platforms, have been instrumental in the acquisition of their monopolies. The definitions and concepts this dissertation subscribe to, emphasize that cultural imaginations around platforms are part of their reorganization, and that contestation should also be understood in Gramscian terms. Platform technology frames itself as the site where the public sphere is, and frames social media publics as 'the public'. Even if social media sometimes feels as *bellum omnium contra omnes*, what is discussed in these spaces, and whatever the perceived outcome of those discussions is, is often mistaken for the opinion of the masses and/or the debate of the public. However, these are commercial spaces, not necessarily adhering to public values, and Big Tech or MsSM do not necessarily serve nor represent the interest of the public. So Big Tech monopolizes our online spaces for deliberation, shapes our public communication and information, and disappears as an infrastructure, while also ascertaining themselves as the public sphere.[291] The fringe lens

287 I will come back to this in Section 5.3 of this chapter.

288 The Alt-tech movement fails mainly because a lack in investment and expertise, or partners with such capital, prevents them from establishing services on the lower part of the trunk.

289 Interestingly, the term *re-networking* has been applied to describe fragmentation of the global internet in smaller spheres of influence. There the term means the deliberate action by governments that leverages major platform companies to detach from nations that are political opponents (Ortiz Freuler 2023).

290 Most famously, Zuckerberg's appearance at the Rome's Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali, where he stated that Facebook is not a media company but a tech company (Segreti 2016), reminiscent of Thom Yorke's plea on 'How to disappear completely'.

291 The platform ecology does not have to be hegemonic though. Gramsci explained that the establishment of hegemonic power is never permanent, but needs to be won and sustained over and over again, by new majorities and alliances, which makes them vulnerable to deconstruction (Gramsci 1971). The Web is a decentral structure, full of revolutionary and contesting potential, and social media fosters networked publics, enabling people to identify under a shared group identity (boyd 2014). So, while platformiza-

exposes this dynamic, because it takes infrastructures, contention, counterculture, and hegemony as central to its analyses.

3.2 Platformization, deplatformization, replatforming

Platformization has shown itself as a process of enclosure, centralization, privatization, and mono- or oligopolist, but also as a process that is obfuscated by its beneficiaries. In the second and third case studies, I examined the deplatformization and replatforming of Gab, and thereby the platformized ecosystem through the fringe perspective. The deplatformization of Gab exposes a power struggle between mainstream and fringe platforms and bares the clashing of commercial and public interests which is inherent to the platformization of the web. These chapters thus confirmed what other recent works within platform studies (van Geuns and Cath-Speth 2020; van der Vlist 2022) concluded before me, namely that partnership with content delivery networks and other infrastructural services, are organizational elements of a platform ecosystem. Through these infrastructures platform power is captured, rule setting power is established, and governance is enacted.

Deplatformization as governing praxis is the logical extension of the platform power that Big Tech holds. However, once it is elicited by fringe platforms, it is also an analytical moment through which the platformized public sphere can be studied. I consider it a case of breakdown, because it renders visible the public and democratic tensions that a public sphere is subjected to under the conditions of platformization. An analysis of deplatformization is thus equally an analysis of platformization, and inversely the concept of deplatformization may prove essential in future analyses of a more sustainable concept of internet governability (van Dijck 2021, 19).

What then do Gab's replatforming efforts signify with respect to the renegotiation of power between the fringe and Big Tech? I argue that the study of replatfoming cases, and the search for infrastructural service and partners, emphasizes both platformization and deplatformization, and therefore power in the platformized public sphere. When the Alt-tech wanted to guard itself against deplatformization but failed to establish its own infrastructural services or parallel infrastructures – mainly because of a lack in investment, partners, and expertise –, the 'movement' had to settle for securing spaces for peripheral re-groupement. Rather than providing a viable alternative model of the web, they created – again – a refuge for the deplatformed, to escape or counter deplatformization as governance. Such replatforming efforts only offer a defense against deplatformization, but do not subvert platformization because no alternative infrastructures are created, only refuges. A

tion has to create hegemony continuously, technologies can also create locations of contestation, even when they are encapsulated by the medium they are contesting. The comment sections of mass media outlets for example, are theorized to allow sub-counter publics to contest the discursive boundaries of the dominant rhetoric (Asen 2000; Toepfl and Piwoni 2015).

process of replatforming that truly creates alternative infrastructures – possibly ideological alternatives – could repillarize our public sphere, and would offer a way out of the technological enclosure and privatization as induced by platformization. I would argue that such replatforming would constitute a move away from – or past – deplatformization and platformization, by establishing alternative models of the platform ecology and platformized public sphere. So, in addition to the study of the renegotiation of power in the platformized public sphere, the study of replatforming can also touch upon how alternative technological models, based on different ideologies, shape alternative models of democratic participation.

Platformization sits uncomfortably with all that is public and democratic about a public sphere. Normative interpretations of the public sphere, such as Habermas' bourgeois public sphere, but also the Deweyan[292] public sphere, are generally a bad fit with platformization, privatization, and conceivably neoliberalism,[293] since they clash with many democratic and public ideals such as inclusivity and legitimacy (Villacañas de Castro 2020). The privatization of our spaces of information and deliberation, the vertical enclosure of users along the stack or trunk, and the majority rule of cacophony, spell a public sphere that is engulfed by the market, which reduces participatory and public ideals. In the next section I elaborate on the ideals of the public sphere, and what the incompatibility of the fringe and platformization mean for our concept and theory of the public sphere.

4. The platformized public sphere

4.1 A democratically deficient public sphere

> "A democratic system is damaged as a whole when the infrastructure of the public sphere can no longer direct the citizens' attention to the relevant issues that need to be decided and, moreover, ensure the formation of competing public opinions – and that means qualitatively filtered opinions." (Habermas 2022, 167).

The technological enclosure of "a hitherto common space" (Peters 2015, 7) has had negative consequences for the online public sphere as a democratic stronghold. Platform power is not just economic power but includes strategic and infrastructural forms of power (van Dijck, Nieborg, and Poell 2019; van der Vlist and Helmond 2021, 13). Likewise, social media platforms are not just economic entities, but also spaces of democratic participation, and media companies, and therefore part of our public sphere. While the appropriation of the

292 John Dewey is a philosopher of democracy most famous for his debate with journalist Walter Lippman in the 1920's, where he defended the public as an important actor for democracy against Lippman's technocratic tendencies based on a far more pessimistic view of the public.

293 This is ironic since neoliberalism is said to have been 'born' at the *Colloque Walter Lippmann,* upholding the famous Dewey-Lippmann rivalry (Reinhoudt and Audier 2018).

web by Big Tech was economically motivated, the expansionist character of platformization came with the by-catch of the regulatory power over speech. Big Tech thus stumbled upon the responsibility of democratic governance in its quest for economic sovereignty. Society's increasing dependence on social networking sites for information and deliberation forces societal duties on these services (Lane 2019). However, elevation of companies as guardians of the public domain is democratically problematic, if not in principle than in praxis. In the name of public interest, private companies deplatform users and even force entire platforms offline, in a reactive and opportunist way, without consistent or reliable justification. Generally driven by public opinion rather than democratic or public values, social networking sites do not adequately disclose how such decisions are made, and reserve sole power to remove communication that it interprets as against its rules without meaningful appeals. Service principles solidify the customer relation between Big Tech and its users, not democratic principles.

It is imperative to protect the internet as a public infrastructure and capture the governance of the public sphere within public institutions through a democratic political process, instead of outsourcing such processes to transnational mega corporations. Governing is a task that historically has been assigned to national governments, public institutions or regulatory agencies, but the fact that most online platforms now operate globally has complicated the ecosystem's governability (Schlesinger 2020). The primitive accumulation of the commons that was the web – at least of the web that was – established the internet as a fundamentally commercial space. The absence of regulation, predictively, has led to monopolization of that space, which manifested itself as platformization. A certain dependency of the public sector on non-public institutions is not unprecedented at all, nor is it necessarily bad, but I would claim that the influence of the private sector on our platformized public sphere has become too great. What is missing is counter power to the hegemonic power of Big Tech companies. This can take shape in the form of the governance *of* platforms by national or international governments, but it can also take shape as the presence of more – and more powerful – non-market governing actors online.

4.2 Leaving Habermas' public behind

As stated in Chapter 2, Habermas criticizes mass media and networked or platform media for being too much under the influence of the market. Habermas ascertains that the public sphere is under threat to be swallowed whole by the economic interest of social media companies and their vie for the attention of users. He also argues that the loss of the gatekeeping role by the media, and transferal of the production, distribution, and reception of news and content to non-professionals and specialists, is erosive for the "infrastructure of the public sphere" and undermines the quality of the debate (Habermas 2022, 157). According to Habermas, the deregulated nature of new media is empowering, but this empowerment is equally true for emancipatory groups and far-right groups (Habermas 2022, 146). I agree

with this typification of the public sphere, which is also valid for the platformized public sphere specifically. However, I argue that the manner in which Habermas conceptualizes the relationship of the public to its media environments, ignores contemporary insights from media studies on 'publics'. This is, in my estimation, the main reason that Habermas' framework works for a bourgeois public sphere and/or mass media public sphere, but is awkwardly applicable to the platformized public sphere. The following is a case in point:

> "The author role also has to be learned; and as long as this has not been realised in the political exchange in social media, the quality of uninhibited discourse shielded from dissonant opinions and criticism will continue to suffer. This is what first gives rise to the danger of *fragmentation* for political opinion and will formation in the political community in connection with a simultaneously *unbounded* public sphere. The boundless communication networks that spontaneously take shape around certain topics or individuals can spread centrifugally while simultaneously condensing into communication circuits that dogmatically seal themselves off *from each other*." (Habermas 2022, 159-160).

In the above quote, Habermas utters his grievances on the quality of the public on social media. I argue that Habermas' analysis is rather superficial here, and that his understanding of the public does not correspond to how online publics are viewed as co-created by media.[294] Habermas allocates agency – and therefore the lion share of the blame for a democratic deficit – to an uneducated or immature public, thereby largely exempting infrastructures from his analyses. Such conceptualizations of media and the public are incompatible with the contemporary platformized public sphere. I argue that questions concerning the spaces of deliberation and information should go beyond who is offered a seat at the salons, and how they should behave.

As I have shown in chapter 2, Habermas has a tendency to bend with most of the criticism. When feminist scholars argued that the concept of the public sphere obfuscated the plurality of publics, he put an 's' after it. When his public sphere terminology was criticized because it preferred consensus over conflict or agonism, he conceded more room for contention. In his latest contribution, Habermas tries to make room for the new publics on the, new, platform media. However, Habermas' understanding of the public is a humanistic one, where enlightened subjects have control and agency over their surroundings and therefore also over media. These subjects, if educated properly, will then express themselves in a rational critical way for the common good. Habermas' public is thus imagined as a com-

294 Of course, I also object to the use of *fragmentation* as a typification of the platformized public sphere, as well as to the suggestion that these spaces are boundless networks, instead of what they are: vertically walled platform silos.

munity[295], organized and educated by media, which knows itself and acts as a political agent through mass-mediated communication (Bieger 2020). The difference is that in Habermas conceptualization of the public, its political potential or agency is *brought by* media, but in this dissertation's conceptualization of the public, the communication and thus the public itself (Peters 2015, 4) is *brought forth* by media.

As said in Chapter 3, publics are a social organization extended through technologies, but they are complicated through them as well. Do the people or the medium constitute a public? Dewey already argued that issues call publics into being (Marres 2005, 14), but online the formation of issue publics is steered by the affordance of the media environment in significantly different ways from mass media. This implies a different understanding of the relationship between the public and the media, than the one implied by the platformized public sphere. For Habermas, the public emerged as a political actor when the discursive publicness afforded by print brought forth its potential to be a political actor. It has been the communicative situation that enabled the manifestation of political practice and agency of the public (Bieger 2020). Online or networked publics, however, are theorized both as spaces and collectives (boyd 2010), a hybrid entity co-created by users and their media. Media environments bring forth not just the potential and agency of a public, but the communication and thus the public itself (Peters 2015, 4). The public itself, not just its political action, is thus co-created by the medium. Following this theorization of the relation between public and media, online publics are different from traditional publics, because of the underlying structure of the network and architecture of the media environment.

This dissertation seeks to attribute the problems of the public sphere, not just to its publics, but in all elements or dimensions of its platformized nature as described in this dissertation. Because the public is co-created by the medium, analyzing a democratically deficient public sphere expands to a more infrastructural, dynamic, and heterogenous framework (as compared to the idea that the public was only mediated through platforms). Because I consider the relationship between government and civil society as co-constructed – instead of just mediated – through their interaction in the public sphere, improvements to the public sphere go beyond media literacy or the *Bildung* of a democratic audience. I advocate for a structural improvement that will garnish better outcomes, and a general sense of democratic participation. Users must be afforded to have a public life online.

More is needed from Habermas then a small indulgence towards the criticism this time. In Habermas' public sphere, the processes and concepts of platformization and fringe platforms can never be fully understood, because these require an understanding of the relation between the subject and the media that is fundamentally different from that of Habermas. Even if Habermas discards the phantom of a public,[296] implied by the abstraction

295 Anderson (1983) is evoked deliberately here.

296 Lippmann (1925) is evoked deliberately here.

of unity and consensus, it still does not comply with the heterogenous nature of a platform ecosystem in which the material and non-material are relevant dimensions, and both the human and the technological have agency. Habermas does not sufficiently acknowledge the larger network of actors, the importance of infrastructures, and the co-constructed nature of 'the public', to account for the public spheres of new media. Habermas bourgeois publics and the platformized public sphere – and all that these concepts imply – are thus incompatible. Moreover, I would argue that a focus on the public as good or bad, uneducated, inadequate, or otherwise, is in my opinion an unproductive framework. It distracts from the improvement of – the democratic functioning of – our public sphere, through improving our systems of communication and information, our media, our democratic processes that are involved in bringing forth a public, and the legal, governmental and technical structures of the platformized part of our public sphere. We should replace the focus on the public as deficient, to a perspective of the public as co-constructed by the medium. If we want to improve the democratic value of a public, we should address the public values enabled and inscribed in the infrastructures and systems that brought forth that public. In the next section, I make suggestions for the study and improvement of the platformized public sphere.

5. What is next for the public sphere?

5.1 Follow-up research

I would like to suggest four strands of research worth pursuing after this dissertation. The first one is to study other fringe services and other categories of fringe platforms to test which characteristics are generalizable over the broader fringe sphere, and also to evaluate the usefulness of my fringe lens for fringe platforms that are not radical free speech platforms. As said, this research has focused on a very specific type of fringe platform. Other fringe platforms might unveil the platformized public sphere in other ways.

Secondly, I could take the concepts I proposed in this dissertation, such as the fringe/mainstream dynamics, the platformized public sphere, publicness, and perhaps even technological pluralism, and see how they apply to the institutions of legacy media, such as media outlets, public or commercial broadcasters, editorial boards, and so forth. Could democratic and public values or *publicness* accompany journalistic values in publishing, curating, moderating, and other editorial decision making? Such research would explore how certain structures and infrastructures of the Fourth Estate function in the larger context of the public sphere, and in what respect they are democratically beneficial, as opposed to focusing on a single outlet or piece of content.

Thirdly, I could review my suggestion for the public sphere, as well as my suggestions for the study of the public sphere, in the context of Habermas' other great work on 'communicative action' (Habermas 1985a; 1985b). In my dissertation, Habermas' theory on communi-

cation is largely reduced to the idea of *rational critical debate*, which lacks refinement to say the least. Concepts from *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* such as "communicative rationality" but also "lifeworld" and "system", might be important building blocks in further theorization of the platformized public sphere. It could – for example – flesh out what would be productive democratic communication, how to deal with epistemological segregation and asymmetric polarization on social media, and how to govern hostile propaganda and misinformation.

And finally, I want to further investigate how different platform technologies imagine different models for the public sphere, public deliberation, and even democracy. What public values and democratic models are voiced through different technologies, and what larger ideological frameworks underpin them? In the final section of this dissertation, I propose three different technological models of public participation, namely the fediverse, the web infrastructures as a commons, and the public stack or public utilities perspective. In future research, I want to analyze these technological models and cultural movements on their vision of the public sphere. As I have done with Gab and the Alt-tech, these technological models of communication and information online, should be analyzed on the manner and extent to which they enable the public to democratically participate, what public values they subscribe to, and how they envision the online public sphere.

5.2 Publicness

If we agree with Habermas that deliberative politics are an existential precondition in pluralistic societies (Bächtiger et al. 2018; Habermas 2022, 149) and that the formulation of normative requirements is a prerequisite for the empirical study of democracy[297], how then do we formulate normative requirements? Throughout this dissertation I have rejected the normative measurements of *rational critical debate* and *consent* because of their hegemonic tendencies. Additionally, in this chapter I have criticized Habermas' notion of the public as inapplicable to the platformized public sphere, but also the way in which it was presented as a sole determinant of a democratically vibrant public sphere. If not by the behavior of its publics, how then do we evaluate the democratic success of a public sphere?

Instead, I propose the term of *publicness* as a normative measure. *Publicness* describes the manner in which the public is enabled to perform its democratic function. This can include the education of the public, but also the functioning of the press, the infrastructures and architectures of our spaces of information and deliberation, the amount of public space in our public sphere, and so on. Both Habermas and Dewey have proposed similar terminology to describe the relation of media and the public in democratic participation. Habermas

297 "The very fact that empirical studies of the formation of opinions under democratic conditions become pointless if they are not also interpreted in the light of the normative requirements they are supposed to satisfy in constitutional democracies highlights an interesting circumstance"(Habermas 2022, 146).

(1989) stated that printing technology brought forth new forms of *publicness*,[298] mediated through print discourse and residing in a shared use of texts (Warner 2002; Bieger 2020). Dewey (1954) proposed the ideal of *public spiritedness*[299] which manifests as the public succeeds – for example in the voting booth, or at a demonstration (Ralston 2002). My proposal of publicness combines Dewey's ideal of the public and public spiritedness manifesting at moments of successful democratic participation, with Habermas' assertion that new media bring forth new ways in which the public is mediated. Publicness thus describes the level of, and manner in which, our platform media manifests successful democratic participation. In this way the normative measure by which to judge our public spaces of information and deliberation, includes not just publics and their interaction with media, but all elements of the platformized public sphere: the socio-technical and political-economic dimensions, the discursive dimensions, governance strategies, and power relations.

Through this term, we can uphold a normative character, by looking at the outcome and whole of a public sphere as democratically beneficial, while refusing to use the concept of the public sphere itself as a normative condition. Thus, democratically deficient elements are not excluded from characterization as part of the public sphere; they are acknowledged as part of the public sphere and their democratic functioning can be analyzed and debated. This means that a left-wing utopian conception of the public needs to be replaced with a public sphere as transformative, conflict driven, and a plethora of different issue-fueled publics. The bourgeois public sphere needs to be replaced by the platformized public sphere, which can be judged on whether the public is adequately enabled to perform its democratic function, or *publicness*. We do not need a perfect public; we need a society that is entrenched with the importance of public affairs. The analysis of *publicness* can include the discursive and non-discursive, and the human or non-human (Schäfer 2011, 15-16) as well as power structures and economic models (van Dijck et al, 2018) and is therefore compatible with a public sphere as a *socio-technical* ecosystem, as conceptualized in this dissertation.

Publicness can neither be synonymous with rational critical debate or consensus nor with a Lippmannian technocratic view of democratic deliberation, nor can it be reached through media literacy. I am not allocating the problems of the public sphere to the quality of the public, and the solutions to these problems are not solely in the hands of experts.[300] A

298 Habermas saw *discursive publicness*; a spirit of collective evaluation and debate, and its capacity to invoke a sense of connectedness among readers.

299 In *The Public and Its Problems* (1954), Dewey argued for public involvement, but wanted to avoid majoritarian rule, as well as a Lippmannian technocracy. The concept of *public spiritedness* was meant to mediate between two (Ralston 2002). This hybrid concept was supposed to harmonize the two by placing citizens and experts in dialogue with each other.

300 I do not intend to suggest that there is no room in the public sphere for expertise or science, quite the contrary. As a community of values, dialogically and dialectically tested production of knowledge, and the presentation of expertise are vital for decision making and deliberative democracy, and so are

vital public sphere will have its own systems of expertise and *Bildung*, but will also include anti-intellectual sentiments and structures that guide the less-literate. It will have agonism, and fringes, and ideological and technological pluralism. Such a conception of the public sphere is able to account for the dynamics between mainstream platforms and fringe platforms. Thus, the question whether the public is sufficiently informed, is the wrong one. Dewey would say that democracy is both an ethical imperative as it is an organization. Is our public sphere not the same? The public in a democratic public sphere does not allude to social unification, or wholeness, but we do all have skin in the game. The question is whether the public sphere functions as we want it to function. We must establish a public sphere that has the highest potential for the public's capacity to act as public, instead of forming users as means to an end.

Well then, how to generate *publicness*? As argued, the first exhortation is to encompass all elements of the public sphere in our analyses, criticism, and solutions. So, while *Bildung* or media literacy might improve the savviness and citizenship of the citizens online, the publics of the public sphere – so the dominant and the counter publics – are co-constructed by the medium. Therefore, to improve these publics, the medium itself is also subject to evaluation. Moreover, this is true for all dimensions of the platformized public sphere, the business and ownership models, the governance praxis and logics, the affordances and infrastructures, the legacy media and state institutions present, the content, the activity, and the discourses. Secondly, if neoliberalism has determined the social rationalities (Villacañas de Castro 2020) of the public sphere as economic ones, maybe we should actively garnish new social rationalities, namely those of *publicness*. In the next section I argue that we need to supplement or replace the current corporate platform ecosystem, with a more public one. The state and the public have to take back space through regulation and alternative platform technologies, imbued with public interest and democratic values.

5.3 Technological pluralism: Reclaiming the platformized public sphere

It is obvious that the web has not moved from a cathedral to a bazaar, but from a public square to a shopping mall. Our information and communication technologies are dominated by private interests and corporate structures – cartels and consortia – while acting with relative independence from nation states (Winseck 2017). We can call upon governmental bodies – national or international – to intervene, avoid monopoly building, and guarantee an open and free public debate. This can take the form of restriction, providing

the institutes that harbour them, such as universities and media. What I mean to say here is that the education or capacities of the public are not necessarily at the root of the problems of a failing public sphere. Our – often immediate – grasps at educating the public through data or media literacy, or inform the public better through factcheckers or more algorithmic induced exposure for expertise, are choices that communicate a very specific idea about the role of *the public* in a public sphere. The choice for these specific solutions often have as a consequence the omission of a more infrastructural solution.

regulatory counterpower[301], but also through the instalment of *publicness* and/or providing alternatives. Different forms of opposition toward Big Tech and platformization harvest different results. For example, prohibiting vertical integration of platforms across the stack, or breaking up Big Tech companies, would probably guarantee better market competition. However, treating the infrastructural layer of the world wide web as a public utility might limit the abuse of power by oligopolies, while maintaining the benefits of scale (Khan 2017, 797). So, providing alternatives achieves different goals from regulating markets.

This dissertation and conclusion section argue that platformization and deplatformization are democratically problematic, and that implies oligopolies are incompatible with the public sphere and democracy;[302] however, suggestions about legal remedies and regulatory oversight are outside the scope of this research. What is inside the scope of this dissertation is the suggestion of alternative platforms and alternative infrastructures to the Big Tech ecology. In this final section, I speculate on how technological pluralism and "decentralization"[303] (Ortiz Freuler 2023) are able to oppose platformization, co-equal to a more public, public sphere. Interestingly enough, it seems that the regulatory scope of action against platform monopoly building is not only broadening, but also combining different frames. Regulatory oversight and intervention on the basis of antitrust laws and competition law, is supplemented by the public and democratic view of human rights law and public law (van Dijck 2021, 13-14). This results in a more general understanding of safeguarding the public against an excessive concentration of economic power, including the virtues of diversity and plurality of media and infrastructures (Khan 2017, 176-179). So, while this dissertation focusses not on law but on public alternatives, it is my understanding that within law and oversight, citizenship or – dare I say – publicness has become a factor as well.

One way to bring forth *publicness* or other principles of common good is by building technologies, specifically web infrastructures, that carry these principles and values. By creating public alternatives, outside of private ownership, a new balance can ensue online, between market, state, and civil society. I distinguish three possible models of decentralization and/or replatforming efforts, which can serve as alternatives to the corporately controlled platform

301 An example is the creation of the category of VLOPs in Digital Services Act, of services that are so big and important that they would fall under extra additional supervision, investigation, enforcement, and monitoring by the European Commission (Broughton Micova 2021). Apparently, seventeen services fall under this category. See https://twitter.com/hutko/status/1626830858127564802?t=V1Ji1ogAnF0Mhc3V5KCmog&s=19.

302 Of course, I'm not alone – nor the first - in addressing the problem of centralization of power in tech companies. Many academics from varying fields have come before me, legislative bodies at different levels are formulating numerous pieces of regulation, and 'breaking up Big Tech' has become a familiar phrase.

303 This refers to the subversion of privatization.

ecosystems of the western tech world, and establish – what I call – *technological pluralism*. These models are; 1) state guarantee provided and controlled platforms and infrastructures, 2) publicly owned and controlled webservices and infrastructures, or 3) an ecosystem based on a federated and decentral shape which would decentralize ownership and governance by design.[304]

The first model of technological pluralism would entail either building state owned web infrastructures, or forms of nationalization or de-privatization of former public utilities; in its extreme form, it would imply that the online infrastructure would either be nationalized or be governed as a public service and possibly as a public utility. Either way, governments should understand and protect the web as public service, understand that this antithetical to Big Tech's interests, and offer public alternatives in order to repair the internet back to its old glory (Stikker 2019). It is crucial that the implementation of democratic values is installed in these technological architecture and governance models (van Dijck et al 2016, 150).

The second model of technological pluralism is publicly owned and controlled webservices and infrastructures. The provision of the internet as a public good is sometimes articulated with the terminology of the commons.[305] Propagators of the commons ideal (Bollier 2002; Lessig 2002) believe that democratic principles and praxis can be installed by creating public goods. For the internet, these ideas are embodied practically and ideologically by the earlier mentioned FLOSS communities (Coleman 2004). The terminology is meant to emphasize values such as accessibility and publicness, against the power of the market and state, but not all evocations of the commons necessarily include the 'open-access' ideal or a total lack of governing institutions, as is the case in Hardin's text[306] (McCay and Acheson 1987, 7–9). I therefore prefer the term public utility to describe the desire for a web where crucial infrastructures are publicly owned and controlled by public oversight. The web, or web services, as public utilities can be run by autonomous institutions (van Dijck 2020) as a way to guarantee accessibility, but also to ensure that these technologies and standards are embedded and carry public and democratic values instead of corporate ones.[307] Obviously,

304 These are not mutually exclusive suggestions.

305 Assemblages and ensembles of resources that human beings hold in common or in trust to use on behalf of themselves, other living human beings, and past and future generations of human beings, and which are essential to their biological, cultural, and social reproduction (Nonini 2006, 164).

306 I refer to the famous article in *Science* titled 'The tragedy of the commons: the population problem has no technical solution; it requires a fundamental extension in morality' (Hardin 1968).

307 In her 2020 'Nutslezing' (2020), Van Dijck talks about the Dutch public utilities called 'Nuts' companies, such as drinking water, libraries, and telephone connections. The implementation of such public services came into being in the 19th century, but many of them have been privatized since the 1980s. She advocates for a return to the public utility model, inspired by a European *Rijnland* model, as a way to guarantee decentralization, data sovereignty, and diversification.

the difference between the state providing the web as public service, and a publicly utility or commons, resides in questions of ownership and oversight.

The third and final proposal to secure the publicness of online space concerns the decentralization of the web; Chapter 5 illustrated the ambition of decentralization as carried by the FLOSS communities operating in the fediverse. The fediverse represents alternative models for internet governance, ownership, and revenue, as well as alternative modes of user participation and communal building, liability and copyright, communal building, and much more. Decentral nonprofit, and self-governed services constituting a federated universe where users are enabled to freely move between services while keeping interoperability (Kwet 2020) may articulate the core of what a commons entails; however, the focus of this model is to instill those values by design, instead of putting the onus on ownership, governance, and oversight as controlling powers. With regard to the public sphere, these communities believe in the provision of free speech through open access to information, inclusivity, participation, as well as productive exchanges of opinions (Mansoux and Roscam Abbing 2020), but as we have seen in Chapter 5 these decentral models of self-governance do run into problems when confronted with the far-right.

This dissertation offers no solution, but an encouragement to explore a combination of public infrastructures, media, and regulatory bodies, with a focus on fundamental rights and democratic values, to garnish a public sphere that brings forth democratic behavior in its publics. I do not propose a technological model, but have sketched a silhouette of a civic architecture that reasserts a balance in the interests of the public, corporations, and the state. It seems plausible that some combination of infrastructures as public service, public utility, and federated technology could bring this silhouette into a cynosure. A combination of government guaranteed protocols, regulation and infrastructures, publicly controlled platforms and services and more decentralized forms of collective ownership, compiling of a platform ecosystem with a plurality of owners, at least large parts owned and governed by citizens and civil society organizations and public institutions.

My plea for a more public internet is primarily a suggestion for another model of online public participation and the revitalization of the public sphere. Technological pluralism must be combined with a rigorous commitment to the provision of public and democratic life online, for it to create publicness. An abundance of public space, a strong civil society, funded and adequately valued public sectors, and a public that understands itself as public and is brought forward to act democratically and publicly. This includes the acknowledgement that technology is ideological and political.[308] Slumbering[309] in this dissertation have been questions about the impact of larger ideological frames such as, fascism, neoliberalism,

308 James Muldoon's (2022) *Platform socialism: How to reclaim our digital future from big tech* for example, really drives this point home.

309 This might be an understatement of how present these questions have been.

and socialism, on our public sphere, as well as questions about democratic decision making, – technocracy versus public participation. Ideas about a more public internet are often antithetical to capitalism, and possibly also to the rise of the far-right fringe.[310] Ultimately, what is at stake, is the publicness of our public sphere.

310 Building on the work of Frankfurter Schule, scholars argue that modern capitalism, sometimes explicitly called neoliberalism, and specifically the privatization and deprivation of public services such as the online, is closely linked to the rise of the far-right (Lijster 2022; Cremaschi et al. 2022; 2023).

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Summary

Fringe platforms

An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere

Radical platforms present themselves as opponents and alternatives to mainstream platforms. One such platform is Gab.com, a far-right Twitter. This alt-right echo chamber came online in 2016 and has since become embroiled in several controversies, mainly due to its refusal to adequately moderate far-right content, channels and users. In 2018 when a white supremacist committed a terrorist attack on a synagogue in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, the perpetrator was found to have a profile on Gab on which he announced his attack beforehand. This led to Gab being subjected to a process of 'deplatformization'. Deplatformization refers to tech companies' efforts to reduce toxic content by pushing back controversial platforms and their communities to the edges of the ecosystem by denying them access to the basic infrastructural services required to function online. In a matter of weeks, Gab lost almost all of its services and partners, was forced to go offline. Radical platforms – in terms of ideology or socio-technical model – such as Gab are what I call a 'fringe platforms'. I defined fringe platforms as; alternative platform services that are established as an explicit critique of the ideological premises and practices of mainstream platform services, which strive to cause a shift in the norms of the platform ecology they contest by offering an ideologically different technology. There are many different fringe platforms. They can differ in what type of service they offer (e.g., fringe Appstores, social media, streaming services, food delivery services, dating apps); or their ideology (e.g., far-right, communist, libertarian/anarchist); and fringe platforms can also differ with respect to their specific type of criticism (e.g., advocating for more or less moderation, denouncing selling personal data as a revenue model, advocating for open-source). However, fringe platforms are not called 'fringe' because they contain or propagate one ideology in particular, but because they oppose a hegemonic mainstream by offering a platform technology that challenges and undermines the mainstream model. The main interest of this dissertation lies not in the far-right radicalism of a platform like Gab but rather in the dynamics between subversive and dominant platforms, in addition to the implications of the processes of platformization for the contemporary public sphere.

Social media companies are ubiquitous in our social lives and public debate. Platform services provide spaces for discussion and grant us access to journalism. Moreover, experts and policymakers – such as journalists, government officials, academics, and politicians among others - participate in the public debate via Facebook, Twitter, and other 'new media'. After the initial euphoria around the democratic potential of social media, the concurring concerns are now equally as prevalent. Concerns not only about the lack of privacy; the

ample presence of discrimination, harassment, and intimidation; but also about entrusting private companies with important public functions. Both these worries and the, now fleeting, euphoria demonstrate that we closely connect social media with our understandings of democracy and citizenship, because media – thus *social* media – are part of our public sphere.

Renowned sociologist Jürgen Habermas referred with the concept of the public sphere, to the societal spaces wherein the public informs itself and discusses matters of public interest in order to communicate its interests to the state's institutions. Thus, the existence and functioning of the public sphere is fundamental to democracy, acting as both a counterbalance to the interests of the state and the market and a conduit between those who rule and those who are ruled. In his 1962 *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Habermas described how the public sphere was transformed through the introduction of modern communication systems. With the advent of social media platforms, the public sphere was transformed again, and this transformation has been dubbed 'platformization'. Platformization is the process by which digital platforms infiltrate infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of entire economic and public sectors, structuring them around their own practices and reorganizing them to align with their own logics and imaginations. Our contemporary web is thus organized around Big Tech companies that collectively own, manage, and shape our public sphere. I coin this contemporary iteration of the public sphere as the 'platformized public sphere'. The overarching interest of this dissertation is how the platformized public sphere functions democratically; how it is constructed structurally and discursively; as well as how it can be improved. However, instead of focusing on the Big Tech and mainstream social media (MsSM) platforms, and thus at the center of the public sphere, I decided to look at the edges of the platform ecology, where radical or counter platform technology are situated. The term 'fringe' is thus a spatial metaphor which depicts those who are not located in the dominant center but on the edges of the public sphere. This dissertation applies a 'fringe lens', focused on the marginal and the radical of the platformized public sphere, which also help gain a better picture of the center. I call this analytical intervention 'studying the thing by looking at its margins'. The contentious nature of the fringe brings forth moments of disturbance through which the platform power of Big Tech over the online, the pervasiveness of the platformization of our online ecology, and the absence of public or institutional governance is made visible. The deplatformization of Gab is an example of such an analytical moment, maybe best described by the term *breakdown*.

This dissertation poses the following research questions: *What is the role of fringe social media platforms in a platformized public sphere? What hierarchies and shifts in power do they signify? And how can they inform us about the platform ecosystem?* These questions are explored through three case studies. Gab is the research object for all three case studies, but the perspective with which the fringe platform is examined shifts depending on the case.

In the first case study, I explore the radical platform as an ecosystem: a pluriform digital environment that is open and connected to the broader ecosystem of the platformized public sphere. In the second and third case studies, I examine Gab as part of the platform ecosystem, shifting the analytical lens to the meso-level of the platformized public sphere, focusing on the power dynamics and infrastructures of the platform ecology.

Through my first case study, I conclude that Gab is best explained as a fringe platform and should therefore be studied as such. I adjust my analytical model accordingly, so that the analyses could adequately analyze fringe platforms as part of the public sphere. This entails a more explicit role for a platform's self-positioning and narrative in the analyses, as well as a shift in focus from a platform as an ecosystem towards a lens that takes into account the (infra)structural consequences of a platform as part of an ecosystem of services. This requires an expansion of our understanding of the *governance by platforms* as applicable to both users and platforms, and a more infrastructural view of the platform ecosystem. In the conclusion chapter, I further specify the aforementioned fringe lens through the incorporations of various methodological insights from my dissertation and conclude that this lens is useful, not only for the analysis of fringe platforms, but also for the study of mainstream platforms, the process of platformization, and the platformized public sphere as a whole. A fringe lens makes the structures and infrastructures of the platformized public sphere visible; highlights power and discourse; focuses on dynamics, conflict and breakdown; and incorporates the dominant and democratically productive as well as the marginal and illiberal, in its analyses.

Through the second case study, I conclude that the deplatformization of Gab demonstrates how the power and influence of private technology platforms reaches far beyond their own boundaries, and that Big Tech companies are managing and owning the public sphere. Deplatformization reveals that platform power is not only economic power but also infrastructural and rule-setting power, and that fringe platforms renegotiate Big Tech's power over the public debate and other public sectors. With the third case, I conclude that Gab – now a self-proclaimed part of the Alt-tech movement – is unable to set up parallel infrastructures that are separate from Big Tech services. Gab managed to gather enough partners to avoid deplatformization, a process called 'resiliency building', however, this came with at the cost of a significant part of their connectivity, which rendered the Alt-tech as precarious and relatively isolated spaces on the web. Gab does not have the capital nor knowledge to build alternative infrastructures themselves, and other tech communities that do, will not partner with the fringe platform because of its radical ideology. However, the refusal of cooperation is mutual. Apart from a changing of the guards, Gab shows little interest in any structural reform of the Big Tech dominated web in contrast to other fringe communities who do strive for radical structural change. In Chapter 5 and 6, I argue that alternative platform technologies are, in addition to alternative technological models, alternative political and ideological models. The absence of alternative web infrastructures

means public spheres outside of the logics of Big Tech are few and far between, or rather, not much is *public* about our public sphere.

In the final chapter, I conclude platformization is a form of technological enclosure through which the privatization of public space is propelled and managed by economic logics. Platformization is theorized as a hegemonic process: monopolizing the public web, shaping our public debate and media system, and positioning itself *as* the public sphere, all the while disappearing as an infrastructure. Deplatformization is the logical consequence of platformization instead of its reversal. Replatforming, however, is the uncoupling from Big Tech web infrastructures, and a step towards the disintegration of platformization. Both deplatformization and replatforming are examples of *breakdown* through which the infrastructures, moderators of the online, and political and ideological norms are made visible. For this reason, these processes are essential to the analysis of the internet as platformized infrastructure.

To understand our platformized public sphere through the fringe lens, we must first let go of (parts of) Habermas' concept of the bourgeois public sphere. No longer can normative dimensions determine whether an actor or process can be considered as part of the public sphere. However, this lens does not mean we are left with solely descriptive versions of the public sphere. Instead, I propose the concept of *publicness* as a prescriptive measure to describe whether an actor, medium, platform dimension, infrastructure, or the public sphere as a whole, enables the public to act democratically beneficial. Moreover, this dissertation argues for considering the public in a public sphere as co-created by the media environments through which it is brought forth. This consideration thus implies a failing public sphere cannot be attributed solely to its publics, since they cannot be separated from the structures and infrastructures of the platformized public sphere. Finally, this dissertation makes an appeal for the public sphere to be made public again, by offering public alternatives to the current platformized web infrastructures.

Nederlandse Samenvatting

Fringe platformen

Een analyse van radicale platformalternatieven voor mainstream sociale media in de online publieke sfeer

Radicale platformen dienen zichzelf aan als alternatieven voor mainstream sociale media en overige platformdiensten. Eén van die platformen is *Gab.com*, een extreemrechts alternatief voor Twitter. Deze 'alt-right echo chamber' kwam online in 2016, en is sindsdien verwikkeld geraakt in verschillende controverses, voornamelijk omdat het weigerde extreemrechtse content, kanalen en gebruikers afdoende te modereren. Gab is wat ik noem een *fringe platform*. Ik definieer *fringe platformen* als radicale platformtechnologieën die zijn opgericht als expliciete kritiek op de ideologie en het handelen van mainstream platformdiensten, en tevens een poging zijn de normen die worden gehanteerd in de platformsamenleving te betwisten en te doen verschuiven, door zichzelf aan te bieden als ideologisch technologisch alternatief. Er zijn vele verschillende soorten fringe platformen, niet alleen qua type service (bijvoorbeeld appstores, sociale media, streaming diensten, voedsel bezorgdiensten, en datingapps); maar ook qua ideologie (extreemrechts, communistisch, libertair/anarchistisch), en qua kritiek die ze leveren op de mainstream (op het moderatiebeleid, de privacy, het verdienmodel, of het gebrek aan open-source). Ze heten dus niet 'fringe' op basis van de ideologie van de gebruikersgemeenschappen die ze huizen, maar omdat deze platformen zich verzetten tegen de dominante en centrale actoren binnen het platformecosysteem. Dit doen ze door zichzelf als technologisch alternatief aan te bieden, en zo een model te presenteren dat het dominante mainstream model betwist en ondermijnt.

Sociale mediabedrijven zijn niet meer weg te denken uit ons maatschappelijk leven en het publieke debat. Platformen bieden ons ruimtes om te communiceren, en geven ons toegang tot het nieuws, de actualiteit, en het debat. Bovendien mengen experts en beleidsmakers (o.a. journalisten, overheidsfunctionarissen, academici, politici) zich via Facebook of Twitter in het publieke debat. Na initiële euforie over het democratisch potentieel van sociale media, zijn de zorgen omtrent privacy, online bedreiging, radicalisering, en privatisering, inmiddels net zo breed verspreid. Zowel de zorgen als de euforie laten zien dat wij sociale media nauw verbinden aan ons idee van democratie en burgerschap. Dat komt mede doordat media, en dus ook sociale media, onderdeel zijn van onze publieke sfeer (engels: 'public sphere'). Befaamd socioloog Jürgen Habermas lanceerde zestig jaar geleden het concept 'publieke sfeer' om te verwijzen naar de ruimtes in een maatschappij waar het publiek zichzelf informeert en met elkaar zaken van publiek belang bediscussieert, opdat dit publiek zijn belangen kan communiceren aan de instituten van de staat. Het bestaan en functioneren van de publieke sfeer is derhalve van fundamenteel belang voor de democratie, omdat hier

het volk tegenwicht kan bieden aan de belangen van de staat en de markt. Het vormt dus een kanaal tussen degenen die regeren en degenen die geregeerd worden.

Habermas beschreef in 1962 in zijn *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* hoe de publieke sfeer transformeerde onder de invloed van (toen) moderne communicatiesystemen. Met de komst van sociale media platformen is de publieke sfeer opnieuw getransformeerd, een gedaanteverandering die we platformisering noemen (engels: 'platformization'). Platformisering is het proces waarin digitale platformen hele economische en publieke sectoren binnendringen en beïnvloeden, en de infrastructuren, economische processen en het bestuur van deze sectoren, structureren en reorganiseren rondom hun eigen gebruiken en logica. Het hedendaagse web is dus georganiseerd rondom Big Tech bedrijven die tezamen onze publieke sfeer bezitten, beheren, en vormgeven. Ik noem deze hedendaagse iteratie van de publieke sfeer de *platformized public sphere*. Deze dissertatie bestudeert hoe een *platformized public sphere* democratisch functioneert, hoe deze structureel en discursief in elkaar zit, en tevens hoe deze kan worden verbeterd. Echter, in plaats van mijn blik te richten op de Big Tech en mainstream sociale media (MsSM) platformen, en dus op het centrum van de macht, heb ik gekeken naar de randen van de publieke sfeer waar de radicale platformen, ofwel fringe platformen, zich bevinden. De term 'fringe' is een ruimtelijke metafoor die verbeeldt dat de macht in het centrum ligt en tegenmacht aan de randen (van de publieke sfeer). De interesse van deze dissertatie gaat dus niet zozeer uit naar het – ontegenzeggelijk – radicale gedachtengoed van Gab, maar naar de dynamieken tussen fringe platformen en dominante platformen, en de implicaties van platformisering voor de publieke sfeer.

Een voorbeeld van hoe deze 'fringe lens' kan worden ingezet, is de analyse van de 'deplatformisering' (deplatformization) van Gab. Toen in 2018 een witte supremacist een terroristische aanslag pleegde op een synagoge in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, bleek dat de dader op zijn Gab-profiel de aanval had aangekondigd. Dit leidde ertoe dat Gab werd onderworpen aan een proces van deplatformisering. Deplatformisering staat voor de pogingen van technologiebedrijven en hun partners om toxische en extremistische content op controversiële, alternatieve, en/of marginale platformen te bestrijden, door die platformen toegang te ontzeggen tot infrastructurele diensten die nodig zijn om online te functioneren, en daarmee hun aanwezigheid op het web te verminderen of te hinderen. In een tijdbestek van weken verloor Gab bijna al zijn diensten en partners, en moest dus offline. Deplatformisering is een voorbeeld van *breakdown*, een begrip uit infrastructure studies, dat stelt dat een infrastructuur pas zichtbaar wordt als deze breekt. Een fringe platform veroorzaakt een dusdanig conflict dat Big Tech services worden bewogen tot het modereren van niet enkel hun eigen diensten, maar tevens het gehele mainstream web. Tijdens dit analytische moment worden de structuren en infrastructuren van de *platformized public sphere* zichtbaar. De moderatie van het web blijkt niet in de handen van publieke diensten te liggen, of gebaseerd te zijn op publieke waarden. In plaats daarvan maken techbedrijven en hun partners de dienst uit.

Deze dissertatie stelt de volgende onderzoeksvragen: *Wat is de rol van fringe platformen in een platformized public sphere? Welke verandering in hiërarchie en macht betekent de aanwezigheid van fringe platformen in de publieke sfeer? En hoe kunnen fringe platformen ons informeren over het platformecosysteem?* Er komen drie casussen aan bod. In alle drie de casussen is Gab het onderzoeksobject, maar het perspectief waarmee het fringe platform wordt onderzocht is bij elke casus anders. In casus 1 kijk ik naar het radicale platform als een ecosysteem; een veelzijdige digitale omgeving die open is, maar tevens is verbonden met het bredere ecosysteem van de *platformized public sphere*. In casus 2 en casus 3 wordt er gekeken naar Gab als onderdeel van dat platformecosysteem, waarbij de analytische lens verschuift naar de relationele dimensies van het fringe platform, en de machtsdynamieken en infrastructuren van de *platformized public sphere*. Waar casus 2 de deplatformisering van Gab aangrijpt als moment van *breakdown*, focust casus 3 zich op de processen waarbij Gab zijn infrastructuren probeert te herwinnen, en pogingen doet parallelle web infrastructuren te bouwen.

In de eerste casus concludeer ik dat Gab een fringe platform is, en derhalve als zodanig bestudeerd moet worden. Omdat een fringe platform een platformtechnologie is die zowel een kritiek is op de macht die Big Tech accumuleert door platformisering, als een alternatief voor de huidige normen en verhoudingen zoals deze gesteld worden door mainstream platformen, pas ik mijn analytische model aan zodat het model fringe platformen in zijn volledigheid kan analyseren. In de eerste plaats betekent dit een nadrukkelijkere rol voor narratief en discursieve (zelf)positionering in de analyses. Ten tweede verplaats ik de lens van 'een platform als ecosysteem' naar 'een ecosysteem van platformen'. In het conclusie hoofdstuk specificeer ik de fringe lens verder, en stel ik dat deze niet alleen een effectief kader is voor de bestudering van fringe platformen, maar tevens voor de bestudering van mainstream platformen, het proces van platformisering, en de *platformized public sphere* als geheel. Een fringe lens maakt structuren en infrastructuren zichtbaar, ziet macht en discourse, focust op dynamieken, conflict en *breakdown*, en incorporeert zowel het dominante en democratisch productieve, als het marginale en illiberale, in de analyse van de publieke sfeer. In de tweede casus concludeer ik dat de deplatformisering van Gab toont hoe private technologieplatformen qua macht en invloed ver buiten hun eigen grenzen treden, en de publieke sector van de media en het publieke debat – oftewel de publieke sfeer – beheren en bezitten. De macht van Big Tech platformbedrijven (engels: 'platform power') blijkt voor een belangrijk deel infrastructurele macht, en fringe platformen vertegenwoordigen een eis tot heronderhandeling van die macht. In de derde en tevens laatste casus concludeer ik dat Gab, dat zichzelf inmiddels heeft omgedoopt tot onderdeel van de Alt-tech beweging, het niet lukt om een parallel web - los van infrastructuren van Big Tech diensten – te creëren. Er worden wel genoeg partners vergaart om deplatformisering te vermijden, maar het kost de Alt-tech beweging dusdanig veel connectiviteit dat ze verworden tot precaire en relatief geïsoleerde ruimtes op het web. Gab heeft niet het kapitaal of de kennis om zelf

alternatieven te bouwen en vindt geen aansluiting bij andere tech gemeenschappen vanwege hun ideologische radicaliteit. Deze afwijzing is wederzijds. Gab lijkt weinig geïnteresseerd in een structurele hervorming van het Big Tech gedomineerde web, en verliest daarmee aansluiting met andere fringe gemeenschappen, die wel middelen hebben tot het bouwen van alternatieve infrastructuren. Dit hoofdstuk stelt dat alternatieve platformtechnologieën, alternatieve technologische, politieke en ideologische modellen zijn.

In het conclusie hoofdstuk, besluit ik – naast de eerdergenoemde conclusies over fringe platformen en de fringe lens – dat platformisering een vorm is van technologische inkapseling en privatisering van de publieke ruimte online. Het is een hegemonisch proces, dat het publieke web monopoliseert, ons publiek debat en mediabestel vormgeeft, en mainstream sociale media platformen positioneert als de publieke sfeer, maar deze Big Tech camoufleert als infrastructuur. Om onze publieke sfeer te begrijpen als geplatformiseerd, moeten wij Habermas' concept van de *bourgeois public sphere* deels loslaten. In een *platformized public sphere* bepalen de normatieve dimensies van het concept niet of een platform of een proces binnen het concept van de publieke sfeer valt. Als een actor zich in de publieke sfeer begeeft, of het proces vindt in de publieke sfeer plaats, dan is het onderdeel van de publieke sfeer. Dit betekent echter niet dat we enkel nog de publieke sfeer kunnen beschrijven, in plaats van deze tevens te willen verbeelden of verbeteren. Ik stel het begrip *publicness* als omschrijving voor de mate waarin de publieke sfeer productief is voor de democratie waarbinnen ze is gelegen, en de mate waarin elementen of actoren binnen die publieke sfeer het publiek in staat stellen democratisch te handelen. Bovendien pleit deze dissertatie ervoor om het publiek in een publieke sfeer te beschouwen als een cocreatie van de media met infrastructuren waarbinnen deze zich formeert. Een normatieve analyse van een publieke sfeer kan zich dus niet vanzelf richten op slechts een tekortschietend publiek, aangezien het publiek niet losstaat van de media waaruit het voortkomt. Tot slot doet deze dissertatie een beroep op het weer publiek maken van de publieke sfeer, bijvoorbeeld door publieke alternatieven voor de huidige geplatformiseerde web infrastructuren aan te bieden.

Curriculum vitae

Tim de Winkel is a scholar of new media platforms, the public sphere, and political communication. He holds a Bachelor's (BA) degree in cognitive neuropsychology and Research Master's (MA) degree in Dutch language and literature, both from the Utrecht University. He has taught critical data studies and computational methods at the New Media and Digital Culture master at Utrecht University since 2017, where he became a PhD candidate in 2018. Between 2016 and 2018 he was a junior researcher at Utrecht Data School. Prior to this he initiated a project to discover the author of the Dutch national anthem through stylometry, which is the field of stylistics but with the help of statistics and computation.